NATION

Apex court transfers RG Kar rape case to Calcutta High Court

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BUSINESS

Rupee recovers 55P from all-time low against USD

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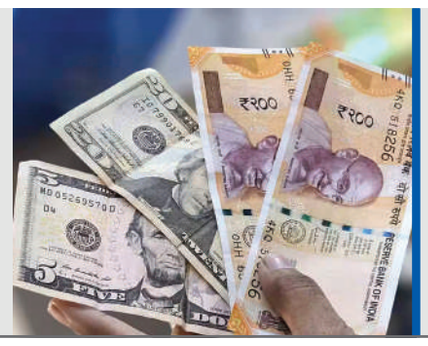

SPORTS

Satwik-Chirag open BWF World Tour Finals with win

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DIGITAL ENGLISH DAILY, BENGALURU

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Parl clears 100% FDI in insurance sector

The Bill allows mergers of non-insurance firms with insurers

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Parliament on Wednesday passed the Sabka Bima Sabki Raksha (Amendment of Insurance Laws) Bill, 2025, raising the foreign direct investment (FDI) limit in the insurance sector from 74 per cent to 100 per cent, with the Rajya Sabha clearing the legislation by voice vote. The Lok Sabha had passed the Bill a day earlier.

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman said the move would increase insurance penetration, lower premiums, attract capital and create jobs. She said higher FDI would allow foreign insurers to enter India without joint venture constraints, boost competition and expand coverage. She dismissed Opposition claims of haste, saying consultations had taken place over nearly two years.

Sitharaman assured the House that policyholders' interests would remain protected, citing strict solvency norms prescribed by the insurance regulator IRDAI. She also rejected fears of profit repatriation and dilution of LIC's role, saying LIC remained strong, with assets under management rising to Rs 54.52 lakh crore and an improved solvency margin of 2.11.

Union Ministers Kiren Rijiju, Ministers of State Arjun Ram Meghwal, Jitendra Singh and others in the Lok Sabha during the Winter session of Parliament in New Delhi on Wednesday **PHOTO: PTI**

The Bill amends the Insurance Act, 1938, the LIC Act, 1956, and the IRDA Act, 1999, allows mergers of non-insurance firms with insurers, sets up a Policyholders' Education and Protection Fund, and improves ease of doing business and regulatory oversight. It also revises tenure norms for IRDAI leadership. Opposition MPs criticised the Bill as reflecting a "colonial mindset". CPI(M) MP John Brittas said allowing 100 per cent FDI threatened social security, while IUML MP Haris Beeran warned of cartelisation. *—PTI*

PARLIAMENT
DAY 13
MONSOON SESSION

LS passes bill to privatise nuke energy

The Lok Sabha on Wednesday passed the Sustainable Harnessing and Advancement of Nuclear Energy for Transforming India (SHANTI) Bill, with Union Minister Jitendra Singh asserting that it would help India achieve its target of 100 GW of atomic energy generation by 2047. The Bill, which opens the tightly regulated civil nuclear sector to private participation, was passed by a voice vote amid an opposition walkout.

Calling it a "milestone legislation", Singh said the Bill would attract investment and give fresh impetus to the country's development and energy security.

NDA members backed the move, saying it would help make India energy sufficient.

The opposition demanded that the Bill be referred to a parliamentary panel, arguing that it diluted provisions of the Civil Liability for Nuclear Damage Act, 2010 by weakening supplier liability in the event of an accident. BJP MP Shashank Mani said the legislation would benefit every Indian by enabling public and private investment in nuclear energy.

Congress MP Manish Tewari opposed repealing the Atomic Energy Act, 1962 and the 2010 liability law, warning of risks during accidents. Congress MP Shashi Tharoor described the Bill as a "dangerous leap" towards privatised nuclear expansion without adequate safeguards. *—PTI*

GOVT TABLES G RAM G BILL IN LS

Union Minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan moved the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) Bill in the Lok Sabha, seeking to replace the 20-year-old MGNREGA and guarantee 125 days of rural employment annually. Chouhan said the proposed law would make villages self-reliant, poverty-free and fulfil Mahatma Gandhi's vision.

Speaker Om Birla said the debate would continue on Wednesday, with the minister's reply on Thursday before the Bill is taken up for passage. Congress MP Jai Prakash criticised the removal of Mahatma Gandhi's name from the Bill, calling it anti-poor and anti-Dalit. Under the Bill, states must frame schemes within six months of its commencement. *—PTI*

Rlys to allow ticket status check 10 hrs before departure

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Indian Railways has revised its reservation chart preparation schedule, enabling passengers to check their ticket status up to 10 hours before a train's departure. Earlier, the first chart was prepared only four hours in advance, often leaving wait-listed travellers uncertain. Under the new system, trains departing between 2.01 pm and 11.59 pm, and between midnight and 5 am, will have their first chart prepared 10 hours prior. Officials said the move will reduce last-minute stress and help passengers plan journeys and alternatives better. . The Board has instructed all zonal divisions to implement the revised schedule immediately, *—Agencies*

EAM holds talks with Bibi on deepening ties

JERUSALEM, 17 DEC

External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and discussed ways to enhance cooperation in technology, economy, connectivity and security, expressing confidence that the bilateral strategic partnership will "grow from strength to strength". Jaishankar arrived in Israel on Tuesday on a two-day visit during which he called on President Isaac Herzog and held discusions with his Israeli counterpart Gideon Sa'ar and Minister of Economy and Industry Nir Barkat. He met Netanyahu later in the day. *—PTI*

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Gadkari vows AI-based toll system by end of 2026

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

India will implement an AI-based, satellite-enabled multi-lane free-flow (MLFF) toll collection system across the country by the end of 2026, eliminating stoppages at toll plazas, Union Road Transport and Highways Minister Nitin Gadkari told the Rajya Sabha on Wednesday.

The new system will integrate satellite-based Automatic Number Plate Recognition, artificial intelligence and FASTag, allowing vehicles to pass toll points at speeds of up to 80 kmph with zero waiting time. Gadkari said the technology would save fuel worth about Rs 1,500 crore, boost government revenue by Rs 6,000 crore and end toll theft.

He said tolling time has already reduced significantly due to FASTag, increasing revenue by nearly Rs 5,000 crore, and MLFF will further improve efficiency, travel time and user convenience. The system will be rolled out in phases, based on pilot project outcomes.

Gadkari warned of strict action against errant contractors, including a two-year debarment from tenders. He added that the Centre is responsible only for national highways, but efforts are underway to ensure transparency, lower operating costs and a corruption-free tolling system. *—PTI*

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Aadhaar database has never been breached: Govt

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

The government has affirmed that the Aadhaar database has not experienced any personal data breaches to date, citing robust security measures. In a statement on Wednesday, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology highlighted that the Unique Identification Authority of India (UIDAI) employs a multi-layered "defence-in-depth" security framework, reinforced by regular audits and assessments. Union Minister of State Jitin Prasada told the Lok Sabha that advanced encryption safeguards data during storage and transmission. UIDAI's systems hold international security certifications, including ISO 27001:2022 and ISO/IEC 27701:2019, and the Aadhaar platform is classified as protected. *—PTI*

PM receives Ethiopia's highest civilian honour

ADDIS ABABA, 17 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi was conferred Ethiopia's highest civilian award, The Great Honour Nishan of Ethiopia, by Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali on Tuesday at the Addis International Convention Centre. According to India's Ministry of External Affairs, Modi received the award in recognition of his outstanding role in strengthening India-Ethiopia relations and his visionary leadership on the global stage. He is the first head of state to receive this distinction. Modi dedicated the award to India's 1.4 billion people, expressing gratitude to Prime Minister Abiy and the Ethiopian people. *—PTI*

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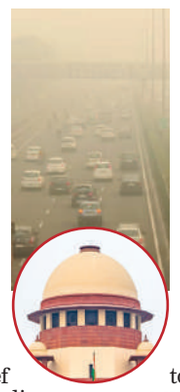
SC bans old vehicles in Delhi amid smog

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Taking serious note of worsening air pollution in Delhi-NCR, the Supreme Court on Wednesday permitted authorities to take coercive action against vehicles that do not meet Bharat Stage-IV (BS-IV) emission standards, while calling for urgent, practical measures to ease congestion and emissions at the capital's borders.



Diesel vehicles over 10 years old and petrol vehicles over 15 years old running on BS-III or earlier norms can now face regulatory action.

A bench led by Chief Justice Surya Kant modified its 12 August interim order, clarifying that protection from action based solely on vehicle age applies only to BS-IV compliant and newer vehicles. The court accepted submissions that older vehicles contribute disproportionately to pollution.

The directions were issued while hearing the long-running MC Mehta pollution case. The bench described Delhi's pollution as an "annual feature" and stressed the need for effective implementation rather than paper protocols.

To ease traffic bottlenecks, the court asked the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) and the Municipal Corporation of Delhi (MCD) to consider temporarily closing or relocating nine MCD toll plazas at Delhi's entry points. The MCD was directed to take a decision within a week, with the court suggesting toll suspension till January-end if needed.

The court refused to interfere with the government's decision to suspend physical classes for Nursery to Class 5.—PTI

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CONG'S STIR AGAINST BJP

CM Siddaramaiah and DyCM DK Shivakumar lead a Congress protest at the Gandhi statue in Suvarna Vidhana Soudha, Belagavi, on Wednesday against the Centre's over MGNREGA renaming and National Herald case. The protest caused uproar in the Assembly after Congress MLA AS Ponnanna sought a discussion on the National Herald issue during Zero Hour, prompting BJP to object and forcing adjournment **—SALAR NEWS**

STATE MULLS MONTHLY FINANCIAL AID TO BUDDHIST MONKS

BELAGAVI, 17 DEC

The State government on Wednesday said it is considering a proposal to provide monthly remuneration to Buddhist monks serving in viharas across the state and that a decision would be taken soon.

Transport Minister Ramalinga Reddy made the statement in the Legislative Council on behalf of Minority Welfare Minister BZ Zameer Ahmed Khan while replying to a question by MLC Shivakumar K "I have spoken to the concerned minister and officials, and necessary action will be taken soon," Reddy said.

He noted that the Minority Welfare Department already pays a monthly honorarium to priests serving in registered Jain basadis, as well as to pesh imams and muezzins attached to Waqf-registered mosques across the State. Shivakumar said there are around 80 Buddha viharas in the state, most functioning without government grants. *—PTI*

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India lost 4 jets in Op Sindoor: UK report

LONDON/PUNE, 17 DEC

A British defence magazine has claimed that four Indian Air Force Rafale jets were shot down during a major aerial confrontation with Pakistan in May, intensifying a political row in India. An investigative report by Key Aero alleged that aircraft bearing serial numbers BS-001, BS-021, BS-022 and BS-027 were lost in a 52-minute engagement on May 7, based on electronic, human and open-source intelligence. Indian authorities have denied large-scale losses and released no confirming imagery. The clash followed Pahalgam attack in, with India launching Operation Sindoor. Amid the controversy, Congress leader Prithviraj Chavan reiterated his claim that India suffered a "total defeat" in the aerial fight. *—Agencies*

>>>More on Page 3

AAP claims victory in Punjab local body polls

CHANDIGARH, 17 DEC

Counting of votes for the zila parishad and panchayat samiti elections in Punjab was underway on Wednesday. Meanwhile, the ruling AAP claimed that it had registered victories in around 900 zones and was leading in many so far. Complete results are expected late in the evening, officials said.

Polls were held to elect members of 347 zones of 22 zila parishads and 2,838 zones of 153 panchayat samitis on 14 December.

AAP Punjab President Cabinet Minister Aman Arora said the results of zila parishad and panchayat samiti elections are in AAP's favour. The results and trends indicate people's endorsement for the Punjab government's policies, he said.

In zila parishad, the results for 71 zones have been declared, with AAP winning in 60 zones, the Congress seven, Shiromani Akali Dal (SAD) and the BJP one each and two Independents, said Arora. "Almost 85 per cent results favour AAP," he claimed. *—PTI*

India summons B'desh envoy over protest

DHAKA, 17 DEC

India on Wednesday summoned Bangladesh High Commissioner Riaz Hamidullah and lodged a strong protest over plans by extremist elements to create a security situation around the Indian High Commission in Dhaka.

The move came after a large group of protesters, marching under the banner of "July Oikya" (July Unity), attempted to reach the Indian mission but were stopped by police near North Badda, close to the diplomatic enclave.

The protesters raised anti-India slogans and demanded the extradition of former prime minister Sheikh Hasina and others who fled Bangladesh following the violent student-led "July Uprising" last year.

Bangladeshi groups march against India in Dhaka on Wednesday **PHOTO: PTI**

Police said the procession began from Rampura Bridge and was intercepted after protesters broke through an initial barricade before being halted by a stronger blockade. Vehicular traffic along the main road near the diplomatic area remained suspended for several hours.

Protesters accused India of interference in Bangladesh's internal affairs, though some claimed they did not intend to attack the mission.

VISA CENTRE SHUT

Citing the prevailing security situation, the Indian Visa Application Centre (IVAC) in Dhaka shut operations early on Wednesday. Applicants scheduled for the day were assured fresh appointment dates. In New Delhi, MEA said India had conveyed "strong concern" over threats to its mission and expected Bangladesh's interim government to ensure the safety of diplomatic premises. *—PTI*

INDIA'S HOPE

'Homebound' makes it to 2026 Oscar shortlist

MUMBAI, 17 DEC

Neeraj Ghaywan's acclaimed drama 'Homebound' has been shortlisted for the Best International Feature category at the Academy Awards, placing it among 15 films vying for a nomination. The film premiered earlier this year in the Un Certain Regard section at the Cannes Film Festival and has since drawn widespread critical attention.

Producer Karan Johar said he was "over the moon" about the film's journey, calling the Oscar shortlist recognition overwhelming. 'Homebound' will compete alongside international titles including Argentina's

'Belén', Brazil's 'The Secret Agent', France's 'It Was Just an Accident', Germany's 'Sound of Falling' and Iraq's 'The President's Cake', among others.

Produced by Johar and Adar Poonawalla, the film stars Ishaan Khatter, Vishal Jethwa and Janhvi Kapoor. *—PTI*

Phones, ganja seized from jails across the State

BENGALURU, 17 DEC

State Director General of Police (Prisons) Alok Kumar on Wednesday said a 36-hour special drive across prisons led to the seizure of prohibited items, including mobile phones, knives and ganja. Six mobile phones and four knives were seized from the Bengaluru prison, while nine mobile phones and 11 SIM cards were recovered from the Mysuru prison. At Belagavi prison, four mobile phones and 366 grams of ganja, allegedly thrown from outside, were seized. Four mobile phones were recovered from the Mangaluru prison and one from the Vijayapura prison, Kumar said in a post on X. He added that such special drives would continue to curb illegal activities inside prisons statewide. *—PTI*

Shilpa Shetty's hotel booked for timings violation

BENGALURU, 17 DEC

A case has been registered against a posh restaurant co-founded by Bollywood actress Shilpa Shetty for allegedly operating past the legal closing hours, police said on Wednesday. The restaurant, Bastion, located on St Marks Road here, was allegedly found operating beyond the stipulated hours, hosting late-night parties in violation of rules on 11 December, they said. "We have registered a case under relevant sections of the Karnataka Police Act at Cubbon Park police station against the manager and staff of the establishment for violating the rules of timings," a senior police officer said. *—PTI*

Youth hacked to death by relative in HD Kote town

MYSURU, 17 DEC

A 24-year-old youth was allegedly murdered by his relative over a property dispute at HD Kote town on Tuesday. Police said the victim, Saleem, was allegedly hacked to death by his relative Touheed. The duo were under the influence of Ganja when the incident took place. Tension had been brewing between Saleem and Touheed over a property dispute. They had an argument on Tuesday night. In a fit of anger, Touheed hacked Saleem to death and fled. The body was shifted to HD Kote General Hospital's mortuary. HD Kote Town Police have registered a case in this regard. Investigation is underway and a manhunt is on to nab Touheed. *—Salar News*

Cong stirs against G RAM G, National Herald 'hate politics'

CM claims cases against Sonia and Rahul Gandhi were part of BJP's smear campaign

BELAGAVI, 17 DEC

Chief Minister Siddaramaiah and Deputy CM DK Shivakumar on Wednesday led a Congress protest against the Centre's move to replace the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA) and what the party termed "hate politics" in the National Herald case.

The agitation was held in front of Mahatma Gandhi's statue at Suvarna Vidhana Soudha and was attended by ministers, Congress MLAs and MLCs. The leaders accused the BJP-led Union government of misusing power and targeting Congress leaders through central agencies.

Siddaramaiah alleged that cases filed against Congress leaders, including Sonia and Rahul Gandhi, were part of a malicious campaign. He said a Delhi court's refusal to take cognisance of the ED's charge sheet in the National Herald case exposed political vendetta. "We strongly condemn the Union government's politics of vendetta and stand in moral solidarity with Sonia Gandhi and her family against intimidation by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Home Minister Amit Shah," he said.

DyCM DK Shivakumar and CM Siddaramaiah lead a protest against the Centre in Belagavi *PHOTO: SALAR*

The CM also criticised the BJP for renaming government schemes and buildings instead of focusing on welfare. He objected to the proposed renaming of MGNREGA as the Viksit Bharat Guarantee for Rozgar and Ajeevika Mission (Gramin) (VB-G RAM G), calling it inappropriate to alter schemes named after Mahatma Gandhi.

Shivakumar challenged the BJP to remove Mahatma Gandhi's image from currency notes if it had the courage to drop his name from MGNREGA, calling the proposed change a national issue. He said MGNREGA was brought in through aN amendment and could not be altered easily. Welcoming the court order in the Herald case, Shivakumar said justice had prevailed and accused the ED of acting under political pressure. *—PTI*

Oppn fumes as ministers skip Council for protest

Treasury benches were vacant, with just one minister Satish Jarkiholi present

BELAGAVI, 17 DEC

The Opposition BJP and JD(S) on Wednesday accused the ruling Congress in Karnataka of being "irresponsible" and insulting the Legislative Council by skipping proceedings to participate in a protest, leading to disruption during the Winter Session in Belagavi.

When the House assembled for the day, treasury benches were largely vacant, with Minister Satish Jarkiholi the only government representative present. This triggered sharp protests from opposition members, who said the government had disrespected the House and the people of the state, particularly those from north Karnataka, whose issues are scheduled for discussion during the session.

Leader of Opposition Chalavadi Narayanaswamy questioned the government's ethics, asking how justice could be done to north Karnataka when ministers and the Leader of the House were absent.

JD(S) MLC Saravana said the opposition had sought an extension of the session by a week to discuss regional issues, but the government's absence made it impossible to raise questions.

Opposition Leader R Ashoka addresses the Assembly during the Winter Session in Belagavi *PHOTO: SALAR*

Narayanaswamy noted that around Rs 30 crore of public money is spent on the session and accused the government of wasting time on "trivial" protests.

BJP MLC Bharathi Shetty and opposition chief whip N Ravi Kumar termed the conduct a betrayal of north Karnataka and an insult to the House and the Chair.

JD(S) MLC Bhojegowda said the government had every right to protest but should not do so during House hours. BJP and JD(S) members later announced a boycott and staged a walkout.

Defending the government, Minister Ramalinga Reddy said ministers were attending a protest, adding that even the Prime Minister skips Parliament at times.

His remarks triggered chaos, forcing Deputy Chairman MK Pranesh to adjourn the House. *—PTI*

BJP walks out of Assembly over Gruha Lakshmi dues

Minister Laxmi Hebbalkar in Assembly *PHOTO: SALAR*

BELAGAVI, 17 DEC

The Opposition BJP on Wednesday staged a walkout from the Karnataka Assembly, protesting the alleged non-payment of two months' installments to 1.26 crore beneficiaries under the state government's flagship Gruha Lakshmi scheme.

The protest followed a heated debate in which BJP members accused the ruling Congress of providing misleading information on the payment status of the women's assistance programme. Trooping into the well of the House, they raised slogans, leading to an adjournment of proceedings for over an hour.

The Gruha Lakshmi scheme, one of Congress's five pre-poll promises, provides Rs 2,000 monthly to women heads of Below Poverty Line families. BJP legislators claimed that installments for February and March this year were not paid, and accused Woman and Child Welfare Minister Laxmi Hebbalkar of misleading the House by stating that all payments until August had been disbursed.

Trooping into the well of the House, BJP raised slogans, leading to an adjournment of proceedings for over an hour *PHOTO: SALAR*

When the session resumed, Hebbalkar admitted that two months' payments had indeed not been made through Direct Benefit Transfer and expressed regret for the incorrect information. Deputy Chief Minister DK Shivakumar defended her, criticising the BJP over the non-allocation of Rs 5,300 crore for the Upper Bhadra Irrigation Project in the Union Budget.

Opposition Leader R Ashoka insisted that the delay affected 1.26 crore beneficiaries and demanded a date for clearing the backlog. BJP MLAs walked out after the Minister's response, arguing it was unsatisfactory, and rejecting her reference to being personally targeted. *—PTI*

Man gets 30 years RI for raping minor

BELAGAVI, 17 DEC

A special POCSO court in Belagavi sentenced a man on Wednesday to 30 years of rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs 50,000 for raping a minor girl.

The convict, Veerappa Muttappa Danannavar, 30, hails from Kaujalagi village in Gokak taluk. The court said the accused committed the crime despite being aware that the victim was speech-impaired and mentally challenged. The prosecution said the incident took place on 19 September,2023. Danannavar entered the minor's house and raped her. The victim communicated the incident through gestures. A case was registered by Kulagod PSI GS Patil and was investigated by Mudalagi CPI Shrishail Byakod. After examining eight witnesses and 44 documents, Judge Pushpalatha found the accused guilty. *—Salar News*

SC quashes FIR against R Ashoka in land allotment case

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

The Supreme Court has quashed an FIR registered by the Karnataka Anti-Corruption Bureau (ACB) against BJP MLA R. Ashoka in a land allotment corruption case. Ashoka is a former deputy chief minister.

A bench comprising Justices Sanjay Karol and Vipul M. Pancholi said the FIR shows a concerted effort on the part of the complainants to cast aspersions on the credibility of the appellant as a public personality and impute ill intention to him.

"The actions against the appellant ex-facie appear to be politically driven and thereby afflicted by malice. Even if the delay is kept aside, the prosecution of the appellant could not proceed in the eyes of the law," the bench said.

In this case, an FIR was registered by the Karnataka ACB to probe allegations regarding illegalities in land allotments during Ashoka's tenure as the head of the Bengaluru South Taluk Bagar Hukum Land Regularisation Committee.

A complaint was filed saying that during Ashoka's tenure, government land meant for SCs/STs and the poor were illegally allotted to his relatives, political followers and corporation councillors.

The SC referred to Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru's 'Tryst with Destiny' speech in which he said, "The service of India means the service of the millions who suffer. It means the ending of poverty, ignorance and disease and inequality of opportunity."

Setting aside a Karnataka High Court order that dismissed Ashoka's petition seeking quashing of the FIR against him, the apex court observed that proceedings were initiated against Ashoka, a public servant, without obtaining a sanction order from the state government. "It is also seen that the record is conspicuously silent on any sanction having been obtained against the appellant. Since no investigation could have begun without such a sanction, the preliminary report of the ACB, subsequent FIR and all proceedings were carried out in the face of an express bar," the bench said. *—PTI*

BJP accuses Revenue Minister of 'grabbing' lake worth crores

BELAGAVI, 17 DEC

BJP on Wednesday accused Revenue Minister Krishna Byre Gowda of illegally grabbing 21.16 acres of land in Kolar district, allegedly recorded as a lake and a burial ground, and demanded a probe and his resignation.

Leader of the Opposition in the Legislative Council, Chalavadi Narayanaswamy, claimed the land comprised one acre in Survey No. 47 and 20.16 acres in Survey No. 46 in Garudapalya village, Narasapura hobli. He alleged the one-acre parcel was originally marked as a burial ground and the larger tract as lake land, both of which, he said, were illegally converted in mutation records to

Krishna Byre Gowda *PHOTO: PTI*

Gowda's name. According to the BJP, the land is now worth over Rs 100 crore, with a market value of Rs 5–6 crore per acre.

Narayanaswamy alleged that changes were made to original records, including the addition of the word 'kharab', to facilitate the transfer. He demanded that the land be taken back by the government and that the minister resign, accusing him of corruption and misleading the public by projecting a "clean" image. BJP workers also staged a protest in Byatarayanapura, Gowda's Assembly constituency in Bengaluru.

Rejecting the allegations, Gowda termed them politically motivated and said the lands were ancestral properties inherited from his grandfather and received through family partition. He denied any encroachment and said he was open to investigation by the Deputy Commissioner, Lokayukta or even the courts. "Let the truth come out," he said, adding that he would cooperate fully with any impartial inquiry. *—PTI*

Woman threatens to end life as cop refuses to accept proposal

BENGALURU, 17 DEC

A woman was booked on Wednesday for allegedly obstructing a police inspector from discharging his duties and threatening suicide if he did not accept her love proposal, police said.

The 45-year-old inspector, posted at Ramamurthy Nagar Police Station, complained of sustained harassment.

According to the complaint, the woman began contacting him from multiple unknown numbers on October 30, speaking incoherently and claiming proximity to senior leaders, including the Chief Minister, Deputy Chief Minister and Home Minister. She allegedly sent photographs on WhatsApp to back her claims and warned she would use her influence against him if he rejected her proposal.

Despite being advised to submit any grievance in writing at the police station, she continued calling and messaging, disrupting official work.

On November 7, she allegedly visited his office and handed over "Nexito Plus" tablets and letters purportedly written in her blood, raising concerns over her mental condition. Police said she persisted even after being told the number she contacted was an official departmental line. Investigations revealed similar behaviour towards other officials earlier. *—PTI*

Help is available. Please call Tele Manas at 14416, SAHAI at 080-25497777 for support

MAAGHI UTSAV

Mysuru Palace gears up for 10-day winter festival

- The festival will be inaugurated on 21 December by Minister HC Mahadevappa, featuring a flower show

MYSURU, 17 DEC

Following the grand Dasara celebrations, Mysuru is all set to welcome tourists for its annual 10-day Winter Festival, or Maaghi Utsav, at the Mysuru Palace from 21 December. Organised by the Mysuru District Administration and Mysuru Palace Board, the event aims to boost tourism during the year-end holiday season.

Tourist arrivals have already begun, with hotels, homestays and service apartments reporting strong bookings. The city boasts over 10,500 rooms across 425 establishments, including luxury hotels and properties on the Outer Ring Road.

The festival will be inaugurated at 4 pm on December 21 by District In-charge Minister HC Mahadevappa, featuring a flower show, cultural programmes and a doll's house at the palace premises. Evening cultural events will start at 7.15 pm daily, with performances by Kannada musicians including Manikant Kadri, Vasuki Vaibhav and Ajay Warrior. The palace will be illuminated from 7pm to 9pm throughout the festival.

Highlights of the 11th edition of the flower show include replicas of Sringeri Temple and Mummadi Krishnaraja Wadiyar, a portrait of environmentalist Salumara Thimmakka, Operation Sindoor artillery, Women's Cricket World Cup winners, and the preamble of the Constitution. About 25,000 flower pots featuring over 35 species, including marigold, chrysanthemum, aster, bonsai and orchids—will be displayed. Five to six lakh roses, along with ornamental flowers such as gerbera, anthurium and blue daisy, will adorn the replicas.

Deputy Director TS Subramanya said the fest has been held for 11 years to promote tourism, with Mysuru attracting over 45 lakh visitors annually. *—Salar News*

PHOTO: ANI

Himachal probes into spotting of 'Pak' balloons

SHIMLA, 17 DEC

Himachal Pradesh police are investigating several balloons bearing the Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) logo or the Pakistani flag, which have appeared in multiple districts over recent weeks. Authorities have contacted counterparts in Punjab and Rajasthan and consulted the Indian Air Force to trace their origin. So far, no suspicious devices, trackers, or surveillance equipment have been found. Local vendors are being questioned about the balloons'. Recent sightings include an aeroplane-shaped balloon with "PIA" on a roof in Chalet village, Daulatpur, and three balloons with the Pakistani flag and "I Love Pakistan" in Tatehra village, Gagret, on 8 December. Similar balloons have also been discovered in Hamirpur and Kangra districts. *—PTI*

Letter of expelled Cong chief reflects BJP mindset: OPCC

BHUBANESWAR, 17 DEC

Expelled Odisha Congress leader Mohammed Moquim has defended his criticism of the party's top leadership, insisting he remains committed to Congress ideology. Moquim, a former MLA, was expelled after writing to Sonia Gandhi questioning Rahul Gandhi's leadership and the age of party president Mallikarjun Kharge, while calling for a more visible role for Priyanka Gandhi Vadra. Odisha Pradesh Congress Committee president Bhakta Charan Das criticised the letter, saying it appeared to reflect a "BJP mindset" and was timed to coincide with a major AICC rally. Das argued that Moquim should have raised concerns internally via the party's Political Affairs Committee rather than publicising them. *—PTI*

UP Minister defends his Hijab remark

LUCKNOW, 17 DEC

Uttar Pradesh Minister Sanjay Nishad on Wednesday clarified his remarks on Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar removing a hijab from a woman's face, saying they were misinterpreted and carried no ill intent. "My remark was tweaked and twisted, misinterpreted, its spirit lost in cacophony and translation," he told PTI, adding he belongs to Gorakhpur and Bhojpuri expressions often differ regionally. Nishad said the comment, which sparked outrage, was light-hearted. "If someone has taken offence, I am willing to take back the words from my side," he added. He stressed that Kumar had "merely removed" the veil to verify a government scheme beneficiary and that officials should have ensured proper arrangements. *—PTI*

Cong spent more than BJP for Delhi polls: ADR report

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

The Congress spent more money than the BJP on "party propaganda" and social media campaigns in the Delhi Assembly elections this year, but lagged on expenses on candidates. The BJP's expenses were higher at Rs 57.65 crore for the elections than those of Congress at Rs 46.19 crore, according to an analysis by the Association for Democratic Reforms (ADR) of the election expenditure reports filed by parties with the Election Commission of India. In terms of total funds collected for the Delhi Assembly elections 2025, the BJP was ahead at Rs 88.7 crore than Rs 64.3 crore of the Congress. In the election for 70 Assembly seats, the BJP emerged victorious with 48 seats, while the Congress could not win a single seat. *—PTI*

Parl passes bill to repeal, amend 71 laws

Law Minister says one of the main aims of the Bill was to enhance ease of living for citizens

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Parliament on Wednesday passed a bill seeking to repeal or amend 71 obsolete and outdated laws with a view to enhancing ease of living for citizens.

Piloting the Repealing and Amending Bill, 2025, in the Rajya Sabha, Union Law Minister Arjun Ram Meghwal said it aimed at removing outdated laws, correcting errors that had crept in during the law-making process and removing discriminatory aspects of certain laws. The Bill was passed by voice vote in the Rajya Sabha. It was earlier approved by the Lok Sabha on Tuesday.

Replying to the discussion on the legislation, Meghwal said that one of the main aims of the Bill was to enhance the ease of living for citizens. "We give priority to ease of living along with ease of doing business," the minister said, adding that if laws have become obsolete, the government would bring legislation to repeal them.

He said that under the Indian Succession Act, 1925, if a Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh, Jain or Parsi made a will in the then Madras, Bombay and Calcutta presidencies, it had to be probated, while a similar provision does not apply to Muslims.

"Why not Muslims? Will there be no consideration over it? This is the Narendra Modi government and the country will function according to the Constitution," he said, adding that any discrimination on the basis of religion, caste and sex is prevented by the Constitution.

The Bill seeks to repeal 71 Acts, including the Indian Tramways Act, 1886, the Levy Sugar Price Equalisation Fund Act, 1976, and the Bharat Petroleum Corporation Limited (Determination of Conditions of Service of Employees) Act, 1988. *—PTI*

Minister of Law and Justice Arjun Ram Meghwal PHOTO: PTI

PT Usha raises Wayanad coffee crisis in RS

Athlete-turned Rajya Sabha MP **PT Usha** on Wednesday warned of a deepening crisis facing coffee growers in Kerala's Wayanad, citing rising human–wildlife conflict, failed crop insurance and labour shortages.

Raising the issue in Parliament, she urged urgent, coordinated government action, scientific wildlife management, insurance reform and faster mechanisation to protect livelihoods and plantations. *—PTI*

Oppn MPs seek RS debate on pending dues of states

Several opposition MPs in the Rajya Sabha have submitted notices for a Calling Attention Motion on funds allegedly owed by the Centre to states and on pollution. They raised the issue at Monday's Business Advisory Committee meeting, noting that no such motion has been taken up during the Winter Session so far. Opposition leaders said they hope the notices will be accepted for discussion. *—PTI*

The government has disabled access to **43 OTT platforms** for displaying obscene content, said Union Minister L Murugan. He said that OTT content is regulated under the provisions of Part III of the IT Rules, 2021.

Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw said passengers must pay for luggage beyond free limits. **Second Class** passengers can carry **35kg for free;** and a **maximum of 70kg. Sleeper coach** passengers are allowed **40kg for free**, with a **maximum baggage limit of 80kg.**

Railway Minister Ashwini Vaishnaw told the Lok Sabha that progress on the installation of the Kavach system was "very fast" and **2,000km of the rail network** had been brought under the system. Kavach is a complex system which has five major systems within it.

THREE-NATION TOUR

Prime Minister Narendra Modi being greeted by Ethiopian leaders during a joint session of the Parliament, in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia PHOTO: PTI

Modi hails bond with Ethiopia; all set for FTA with Oman

ADDIS ABABA, 17 DEC

Prime Minister Narendra Modi concluded his maiden bilateral visit to Ethiopia on Wednesday, leaving for Oman to witness the signing of a free trade agreement aimed at boosting economic ties. Addressing the Joint Session of the Ethiopian Parliament, Modi called India and Ethiopia "natural partners" in regional peace, security, and connectivity. He highlighted shared goals for a just, equitable, and peaceful world, emphasising cooperation in defence, technology, agriculture, and trade.

Modi and Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed Ali elevated bilateral relations to a Strategic Partnership, signing MoUs on UN Peacekeeping training, customs cooperation, data centre establishment, maternal and neonatal healthcare, scholarships, and AI short courses. He also planted a sapling under India's 'Ek Ped Maa Ke Naam' initiative and Ethiopia's Green Legacy programme.

At a state banquet hosted by Abiy, Ethiopian singers performed a rendition of India's national song, Vande Mataram, which Modi described as "deeply moving," marking the 150th anniversary of the song.

He applauded the warm reception and underscored the historical, cultural, and people-to-people ties between the nations.

Recalling India's support during the Covid-19 pandemic, Modi highlighted the supply of over four million vaccine doses to Ethiopia and Indian investments exceeding USD 5 billion, creating 75,000 local jobs.

In Oman, Modi is set to witness the signing of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA), India's first FTA with Oman in two decades. *—PTI*

Cong leader defiant after facing backlash on Op Sindoor remarks

MUMBAI, 17 DEC

Despite facing criticism, senior Congress leader **Prithviraj Chavan** on Wednesday stood by his controversial comments that India faced a "total defeat" in aerial fight with Pakistan on the first day of Operation Sindoor on 7 May.

The former Union minister refused to apologise for his comments on the Indian military operation against terror hubs in Pakistan and PoK in the aftermath of the massacre of tourists at Pahalgam in Jammu and Kashmir in April.

Talking to reporters in Pune on Tuesday, Chavan claimed India faced a "total defeat in the aerial fight (with Pakistan) on 7 May which lasted for half-an-hour".

"One may believe this or not. After that the Indian Air Force got grounded and not a single aircraft took flight that day.... be it Gwalior, Bhatinda or Sirsa, there was a possibility of aircraft being shot down, so our complete Air Force was grounded," the former Maharashtra chief minister had said.

- Talking to reporters on Tuesday, Chavan claimed India faced a "total defeat in the aerial fight (with Pakistan) on 7 May which lasted for half-an-hour".

Hitting out at Chavan, Maharashtra Deputy Chief Minister Eknath Shinde accused the Congress of speaking the language of Pakistan. He said questioning the military action was akin to demoralising the morale of armed forces.

"The criticism does not stem from the love of the nation, but love for Pakistan," said the chief leader of the Shiv Sena, a key constituent of the BJP-led NDA.

Chavan, however, remained defiant.

"There is no question of apologising. The Constitution has given me the right to ask questions," the Congress veteran asserted.

Chavan also questioned the need of having a 12-lakh strong Army when future wars will be about aerial combats & missiles. "During Operation Sindoor we saw that there was no movement of the Army even for a kilometre," he said. *—PTI*

SIT begins probe into Messi event chaos in Bengal

KOLKATA, 17 DEC

A Special Investigation Team (SIT) formed by the West Bengal government on Wednesday began probing vandalism during Argentine football icon Lionel Messi's event at Salt Lake Stadium last week, officials said. The team, comprising senior IPS officers Piyush Pandey, Javed Shamim, Supratim Sarkar and Muralidhar, inspected the stadium and visited the Bidhannagar Police Commissionerate.

Leader of Opposition Suvendu Adhikari demanded the arrest of TMC ministers Aroop Biswas and Sujit Bose, alleging they hogged the spotlight and triggered chaos. He sought the release of arrested spectators and ticket refunds, alleging a ticketing scam, and moved the Calcutta High Court. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee accepted Biswas's resignation from sports portfolio earlier this week. *—PTI*

Jaishankar holds talks with Netanyahu

JERUSALEM, 17 DEC

External Affairs Minister S. Jaishankar met Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and discussed ways to enhance cooperation in technology, economy, connectivity and security, expressing confidence that their strategic partnership will "grow from strength to strength."

Jaishankar arrived in Israel on Tuesday on a two-day visit during which he called on President Isaac Herzog and held discussions with his Israeli counterpart Gideon Sa'ar and Minister of Economy and Industry Nir Barkat. He met Prime Minister Netanyahu later in the day.

Union External Affairs Minister S Jaishankar with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and others, in Jerusalem, on Wednesday PHOTO: PTI

"Deeply appreciate the call on Prime Minister Israel @ netanyahu in Jerusalem this evening. Extended warm wishes of PM @narendramodi. Discussed deepening cooperation in technology, economy, skills and talent, connectivity and security," Jaishankar said in a post on social media platform X on Tuesday.

"Valued his perspectives on regional and global developments. Confident that our Strategic Partnership will grow from strength to strength," he added.

Prime Minister Netanyahu also acknowledged the meeting in a social media post, sharing pictures from the meeting. Jaishankar's visit comes as preparations are underway for Netanyahu's proposed trip to India. *—PTI*

WEST BENGAL SIR

'Awasthi' added to names of Muslim CPI(M) Chief, son

KOLKATA, 17 DEC

Atish Aziz, son of the state Secretary of CPI(M)'s West Bengal unit Md Salim, has alleged a mix-up in the draft electoral rolls published by the Election Commission (EC), claiming that a Hindu surname, 'Awasthi', was added to both his name and that of his father, triggering a political controversy.

In a social media post on Tuesday, Aziz said he is a registered voter of the Kolkata Port Assembly constituency and that his name is Atish Aziz.

"My father has been a politician for decades. If such an error can happen in his case, one can only imagine what might have happened to others," Aziz said.

He also questioned the purpose of conducting the Special Intensive Revision (SIR) at a cost of crores of rupees if such basic inaccuracies surface.

Md Salim PHOTO: PTI

In a sharp remark, he wrote that while "sections of the media and the BJP had been gloating that the SIR process would be used to tighten the screws on Muslims," the EC instead ended up "turning both my father Md Salim and me into Brahmins" by adding the Awasthi surname.

SIR HEARINGS

Around 1.36 crore voters will be called for hearings as part of the SIR of electoral rolls in West Bengal, a senior Election Commission official said.

He said the state has completed the SIR exercise within the stipulated timeframe.

Agarwal said the names of these voters were flagged during the exercise.

Meanwhile, the TMC leadership has decided to instruct its booth-level agents to carry out fresh, door-to-door scrutiny of deleted voters' names in Bhabanipur, West Bengal Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee's assembly constituency, after nearly 45,000 electors were struck off from the draft rolls under the SIR exercise, party sources said. *—PTI*

Bihar struggles to recover ₹10,000 miscredited aid

DARBHANGA/PATNA, 17 DEC

Bihar officials are struggling to recover Rs 10,000 credited to male villagers under a women-only transfer scheme in the district.

Under the Mukhyamantri Mahila Rojgar Yojana, launched on 26 September ahead of the Assembly elections, Rs 10,000 was transferred to bank accounts of about 1.40 crore women entrepreneurs. However, implementing agency Jeevika said technical glitches led to the amount being credited to some men in Ahiyari village of Jale Assembly constituency.

Several recipients have spent the money, some during festivals, while others bought ducks and goats, officials said. Notices have been issued to at least three men, Nagendra Ram, Balram Sahni and Ram Sagar Kumar, asking them to return the funds. The recipients, who are disabled and economically poor, said they had not applied for it and were unable to repay it. *—PTI*

'Mfg declining in India, Centre killing small biz'

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Manufacturing is the backbone of strong economies, Congress leader Rahul Gandhi said on Wednesday, while asserting that manufacturing is declining in India and that the Centre is determined to kill small business.

The country needs to build meaningful manufacturing ecosystems for accelerating growth, Gandhi said in a social media post after a guided tour of BMW Welt and the BMW Plant in Munich.

Gandhi, who is on a visit to Germany, said the highlight of the BMW tour was seeing TVS's 450cc motorcycle, developed in partnership with BMW.

A highlight was seeing TVS's 450cc motorcycle, developed in partnership with BMW, he said, adding that it was a proud moment to see Indian engineering on display.

Gandhi is visiting Germany at the invitation of the Progressive Alliance, a key group of 117 progressive parties from across the world.

LoP in the Lok Sabha and Congress leader Rahul Gandhi during his visit to BMW Welt, in Munich, Germany PHOTO: PTI

Gandhi accused the Modi government of creating a "monopoly or duopoly" in every sector and demanded that the reins of India's economy should be put back into the hands of MSMEs.

He said that during the Winter Session of Parliament, he met a delegation of small and medium ice cream manufacturers and it became clear that the government is determined to destroy small businesses. *—PTI*

Bombay HC allows Elgar case accused to shift to Delhi

MUMBAI, 17 DEC

The Bombay High Court permitted human rights activist Gautam Navlakha, an accused in the Elgar Parishad-Maoist links case, to shift to his house in Delhi, but said he will have to appear before the special NIA court here for hearings. A bench of Justices Bharati Dangre and Shyam Chandak said Navlakha should appear every Saturday before the local police station in Delhi, surrender his passport and must not leave Delhi without permission from the special court. Navlakha's counsel, Yug Chaudhary, sought relaxation of the condition to appear before the local police station once every week to once a month, as he now appears only once a month. —*PTI*

PHOTO: FACEBOOK

Comedian Russell Peters visiting India in March

MUMBAI, 17 DEC

Comedian Russell Peters is bringing his Relax World Tour to India with shows in New Delhi, Hyderabad, Bengaluru and Kolkata next March. Peter's tour dates are: 15 March, 2026 - New Delhi; 18 March, 2026 - Pune; 20 March, 2026 - Bengaluru; 22 March, 2026 - Mumbai; 25 March, 2026 - Hyderabad; 27 March, 2026 - Chennai; and 29 March, 2026 - Kolkata. This tour marks Peter Russell's biggest, most expansive tour of India to date, giving fans across the country the chance to experience his all-new material as well as his signature, razor-sharp crowd work. Tickets will be available on District app by Zomato, with general sales opening on 22 December, 2025. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

10 Ahmedabad schools receive hoax bomb threats

AHMEDABAD, 17 DEC

Ten private schools in Ahmedabad received an email on Wednesday threatening bombings, which later turned out to be a hoax as nothing suspicious was found during searches, police said. As a precautionary measure, the schools declared a holiday for the afternoon shift as the morning shift was already over when they received the emails, having a common text, Deputy Commissioner of Police, Zone 1, Harshad Patel said. The police, along with the bomb detection and disposal squad, dog squad and anti-sabotage teams, reached the schools and conducted a thorough search. "Cybercrime teams are now trying to find the source of these emails and who is behind them," Patel said. —*PTI*

Pak woman enters J&K's Poonch after dispute with father

JAMMU, 17 DEC

The Army apprehended a Pakistani woman who had crossed into Jammu and Kashmir's Poonch district along the Line of Control (LoC) after an argument with her father in Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK), officials said on Wednesday. "A 35-year-old Pakistani national, identified as Shehnaz Akhtar of the Gimma area of Kotli district in PoK, was apprehended by Army soldiers from the Dabbi forward area in the Balakote sector on Tuesday," they said. Preliminary inquiries revealed that she had an argument with her father and fled home towards the LoC area, they said. The woman has not been handed over to the police, they added. —*PTI*

Delhi orders 50% WFH amid smog

The President's Bodyguards at Vijay Chowk on a smoggy winter morning, in New Delhi PHOTO: PTI

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

With air quality remaining in the 'very poor' to 'severe' range, the Delhi government has mandated that all private offices in the national capital operate with only 50 per cent of staff physically present, while the remaining employees work from home, under GRAP Stage IV restrictions aimed at curbing pollution-driven vehicular movement.

The directive, issued by the Labour Department, follows amendments by the Commission for Air Quality Management (CAQM) and warns of penal action under the Environment (Protection) Act, 1986, for non-compliance.

The order applies across the National Capital Territory, with exemptions granted to hospitals, health establishments, public transport, sanitation, emergency services, prisons, utilities, disaster management agencies and departments involved in air pollution monitoring and enforcement. Private offices have also been asked to implement staggered working hours, strictly adhere to work-from-home norms and minimise commuting-related travel.

Labour Minister Kapil Mishra reiterated that government and private institutions must enforce the 50 per cent work-from-home mandate from Thursday, cautioning that violations would attract action. He also announced Rs 10,000 compensation for construction workers rendered unemployed due to prolonged GRAP III and IV curbs, applicable to workers registered with the government. He said compensation would be extended for each day the restrictions remain in force.

The measures come as Delhi's 24-hour average Air Quality Index stood at 334 on Wednesday, slightly improving from 354 a day earlier but remaining firmly in the 'very poor' category. Forecasts suggest air quality may oscillate between 'very poor' and 'severe' levels over the next six days. Transport emissions accounted for over 16 per cent of pollution and are projected to rise further.

Environment Minister Manjinder Singh Sirsa outlined parallel steps, including overhauling the Pollution Under Control Certificate system with third-party monitoring, developing a car-pooling app, deploying mechanical road sweepers and water sprinklers, increasing electric bus fleets, and partnering with Google Maps to identify vehicular pollution hotspots. He said Delhi was coordinating with neighbouring states for a regional response and testing "smog-eating" surfaces in collaboration with IIT Madras.

Additionally, officials said enforcement teams will monitor compliance through inspections and complaints, while offices are encouraged to promote virtual meetings and flexible shifts. Authorities urged residents to limit outdoor activity, stressing that temporary curbs are essential to prevent further deterioration in public health. – *PTI*

Goa fire: Luthra brothers sent to five days of police custody

PANAJI, 17 DEC

A court in North Goa on Wednesday remanded Gaurav and Saurabh Luthra, co-owners of the 'Birch by Romeo Lane' nightclub, to five days of police custody in connection with the 6 December fire that killed 25 people.

The brothers were produced before Judicial Magistrate Puja Sardesai after being brought to Goa from Delhi following deportation from Thailand. They underwent examinations at health facilities in Siolim and the District Hospital in Mapusa before being presented in court.

Advocate Vishnu Joshi, appearing for Bhavana Joshi, who lost four family members in the blaze, told the court the accused were seeking "special consideration" on health grounds. "We said they should not be given any extra relaxation," he said, adding the court noted the gravity of the case. Joshi said medical reports showed the brothers did not require special treatment. The court also rejected their request for facilities in lock-up, including a mattress.

One of the Luthra brothers, co-owners of the Birch by Romeo Lane nightclub, being taken to a court from Anjuna police station, in North Goa district PHOTO: PTI

- The brothers were produced before Judicial Magistrate Puja Sardesai after being brought to Goa from Delhi following deportation from Thailand

Goa Police filed a case against the Luthras after the fire at Arpora village, invoking charges including culpable homicide not amounting to murder.

Five managers and staff members have already been arrested.

The brothers had fled abroad hours after the incident but were detained by foreign authorities and deported to India under legal arrangements. —*PTI*

Chh'garh liquor case: ED arrests ex-CMO officer

RAIPUR, 17 DEC

The Enforcement Directorate on Tuesday arrested Soumya Chaurasia, a suspended state administrative service officer who served as deputy secretary in the CM's Office during the previous Congress government in Chhattisgarh, in connection with the alleged liquor scam.

ED counsel Saurabh Kumar Pande said Chaurasia was arrested late in the evening and will be produced before a special court on Wednesday.

Chaurasia is also an accused in the coal levy scam and was arrested in 2022. She was released earlier this year after the SC granted her interim bail in May.

In the liquor case, the ED has already arrested Congress MLA and former excise minister Kawasi Lakhma, and Chaitanya Baghel, son of the former CM. The agency alleged Lakhma was the main beneficiary. —*PTI*

'HC ALREADY MONITORING CASE'

Apex court transfers RG Kar rape case to Calcutta High Court

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

The Supreme Court on Wednesday transferred to the Calcutta High Court its suo motu proceedings in the RG Kar Medical College trainee doctor rape and murder case, asking the High Court to monitor implementation of its directions and related issues.

A bench of Justices MM Sundresh and Satish Chandra Sharma directed that all case papers be sent to the High Court and that a copy of the CBI status report be provided to the victim's parents. The court said a constitutional court in West Bengal was best placed to continue oversight, noting the High Court was already monitoring the investigation and prosecution.

Senior advocate Karuna Nundy, appearing for doctors' associations and the victim's family, urged at least one hearing on issues linked to the National Task Force (NTF) constituted to evolve a national consensus on medical professionals' safety. She said the NTF had been set up to frame remedial recommendations and only a limited hearing was required.

However, the bench held that all pending matters, including the NTF's work, could be addressed by the Calcutta HC. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta also supported the transfer. The crime sparked nationwide protests after Roy's conviction and the SC's oversight. —*Agencies*

SC seeks measures to prevent incidents like shoe hurling on CJI

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

The Supreme Court on Wednesday asked the Centre and the Supreme Court Bar Association to suggest measures to prevent incidents such as the shoe-hurl attempt targeting former Chief Justice BR Gavai inside the courtroom. A bench of Chief Justice Surya Kant and Justice Joymalya Bagchi also sought a standard operating procedure for media reporting of such episodes. Solicitor General Tushar Mehta and SCBA president Vikas Singh said joint suggestions would be submitted. The court waived issuing notice, calling the issue non-adversarial, and expressed reluctance to initiate contempt against advocate Rakesh Kishore, whose licence was suspended by Bar Council India. —*PTI*

5 NABBED FOR KILLING GANGSTER BISHNOI'S EX-AIDE PARRY

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Delhi Police have arrested five members of the Aarzoo–Anmol Bishnoi–Harry Boxer syndicate for the murder of rival gangster Inderpreet Singh alias Parry in Chandigarh earlier this month, sources said Wednesday. Parry, a former aide of Lawrence Bishnoi, was shot dead on 1 December while seated in his SUV after leaving a club, and died while being taken to hospital. Police suspect inter-gang rivalry, as Parry had allegedly shifted allegiance to Canada-based gangster Goldy Brar. A Sector 33 resident, he faced multiple cases in Chandigarh and Punjab. The Bishnoi gang later claimed responsibility online. The arrested accused were absconding and are linked to other high-profile murders. —*PTI*

Delhi HC bins PIL on higher compensation to IndiGo flyers

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

The Delhi High Court on Wednesday refused to entertain a PIL seeking directions to the Centre and IndiGo to pay four times the ticket price as compensation to passengers whose flights were cancelled in November and December following the roll-out of new Flight Duty Time Limitation rules.

A bench comprising Chief Justice Devendra Kumar Upadhyaya said the issue was already under consideration in an earlier PIL and granted liberty to the petitioner to seek intervention in the pending petition," the bench said.

The plea was filed by the Centre for Accountability and Systemic Change through its president Prof Vikram Singh, citing widespread disruption due to last-minute cancellations that left thousands of passengers stranded. Counsel Virag Gupta alleged overcrowded airports, baggage chaos, poor communication by airlines and confusion over refunds and rebooking.

The petition also sought a probe into alleged DGCA lapses. Earlier, the court questioned the Centre over delayed action as IndiGo cancelled hundreds of flights last December nationwide. —*PTI*

Odisha man taken hostage in Sudan returns home

BHUBANESWAR, 17 DEC

After 45 days in captivity in Sudan, 36-year-old Adarsh Behera from Odisha returned home on Wednesday, bringing relief to his family. Behera had gone missing from Al-Fashir in Sudan's North Darfur state and was freed with the help of international interlocutors, a senior official said.

He was received by his family, including his three-year-old son, at Biju Patnaik International Airport. "It is a rebirth for me. I did not expect to survive," Behera said, alleging torture, denial of food and forced movement by the Rapid Support Forces militia. A resident of Kotakana in Jagatsinghpur, Behera had gone to Sudan in 2022 to work as a mechanic in a plastic factory. His wife urged the Odisha government to provide him employment. —*PTI*

Sabarimala row: SIT arrests ex-TDB officer Sreekumar

T'PURAM, 17 DEC

The special investigation team (SIT) probing the Sabarimala gold loss cases on Wednesday arrested former Travancore Devaswom Board (TDB) administrative officer S Sreekumar, sources said.

The arrest comes nearly two weeks after the Kerala High Court rejected his anticipatory bail plea, holding that the allegations against him were prima facie established.

The court had also dismissed the pre-arrest bail plea of former TDB secretary S Jayasree, warning that granting relief would derail the probe and render the investigation meaningless. The High Court noted that both officials knew the Dwarapalaka idol plates were gold-clad but signed records describing them as copper. The SIT, constituted by court orders, is investigating the loss of gold from the Dwarapalaka idols and the Sreekovil door frames.

The arrest comes nearly two weeks after the Kerala High Court rejected his anticipatory bail plea PHOTO: PTI

Sreekumar is the seventh accused to be arrested. Earlier arrests include prime accused Unnikrishnan Potty and former TDB presidents N Vasu and A Padmakumar. —*PTI*

NO CASUALTIES, NO ARRESTS YET

Manipur's Bishnupur on alert after firing by unidentified group

IMPHAL, 17 DEC

Security was heightened across Manipur's Bishnupur district Wednesday after unidentified miscreants fired near the Churachandpur border Tuesday night, officials said.

Gunshots were reported around 9pm near Torbung and Phougakchao Ikhai, but no injuries occurred.

"The situation remains calm but tense," a senior official said, noting additional forces were deployed.

Police launched an investigation; no arrests have been made. Torbung and Phougakchao Ikhai were flashpoints during 3 May, 2023, ethnic clashes between Meitei and Kuki communities.

Gunshots were heard on Tuesday near Torbung and Phougakchao Ikhai, areas along the Bishnupur–Churachandpur boundary PHOTO: ANI

The recent firing alarmed residents, including returning displaced families, with several women and children fleeing to safer locations.

The incident followed a security review in Churachandpur chaired by Director General of Police Rajiv Singh.

Authorities urged calm, intensified night patrols, and warned of strict action against disturbances. —*PTI*

Curbs imposed along India Bangla border in Assam

SILCHAR, 17 DEC

Prohibitory orders have been imposed along the India-Bangladesh border in Assam's Cachar district by the administration to prevent illegal movement, an official release said on Wednesday.

Restrictions were imposed along the border due to apprehension over the possible movement of extremists, it said.

District Magistrate Mridul Yadav, exercising powers under Section 163 of the Bharatiya Nagarik Suraksha Sanhita (BNSS), issued the order on Tuesday aimed at preventing the illegal movement of people, goods and activities.

Unchecked movement, particularly during night, could facilitate unlawful activities, including unauthorised transportation of essential commodities and cattle, thereby posing serious challenges to law and order, the order stated.

Movement of individuals has been restricted from sunset to sunrise within a one-kilometre belt along the border.

In addition, movement on the Surma River and along its banks within Indian territory has been prohibited during night.

The order also places strict curbs on boating and fishing on the Surma River. —*PTI*

Woman lured with job, gangraped in Beed; 4 booked

BEED, 17 DEC

A woman from Baramati in Pune was allegedly raped by three men in Maharashtra's Beed district after being promised a job, police said. The incident took place six months ago, they said, adding that a case was filed a few days back against four persons, including a woman.

The accused woman lured the victim promising her a job at an arts centre at Ambajogai in Beed.

However, after the victim arrived here, the woman and two other persons forcibly took her to a lodge where three men raped her, the complaint stated. Attempts were also made to force her into prostitution. The victim managed to contact her mother, who rushed to Ambajogai, and rescued her. —*PTI*

COLD WAVE GRIPS INDIA

A farmer harvests potatoes amid dense fog on a cold winter morning in Amritsar on Wednesday. As winter tightens its grip across India, IMD has sounded alerts for dense fog, cold wave conditions and snowfall. Persistent fog has affected daily life and flights in Delhi, among other places. Cold wave conditions are also forecast over the Northeast, Punjab, Uttarakhand, Odisha, Haryana, Chandigarh, Uttar Pradesh, Telangana and parts of Karnataka
PHOTO: PTI

Missed deadline led to IFFK censor crisis, says expert

Amid widespread public outrage over the Centre's denial of censor exemption to films at the ongoing International Film Festival of Kerala (IFFK), former artistic director Deepika Suseelan on Wednesday said procedural lapses by the organisers, rather than political targeting, led to the controversy and warned against misrepresenting administrative failures as ideological censorship.

Suseelan, who served as art director of the 27th IFFK in 2022, said framing the issue as political victimisation diverts attention from the core problem: failure to follow established procedures and timelines. In a strongly worded Facebook post, she questioned why the organisers chose to fuel "public outrage" instead of adhering to due process. "If one is committed to freedom of expression and institutional integrity, the least expectation is adherence to protocol and timelines, not public grandstanding after administrative negligence," she wrote.

Explaining the censor exemption process, Suseelan said it is not instantaneous and requires a minimum of one month, allowing time to respond to clarifications sought by the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting. For a festival held in December, she said, the list of films requiring exemption — along with synopses and supporting documents — must be submitted by the first week of November, which had been standard practice in previous editions of IFFK.

"The festival is supposed to have the exemption order at least 15 days before commencement," she said, adding that reports indicate the Kerala State Chalachitra Academy (KSCA), which organises the festival, submitted the application only in December. The 30th edition of IFFK began on December 12 and will conclude on 19 December.

Former art director Deepika Suseelan served as artistic director of the 27th IFFK in 2022 ***PHOTO: SCREENGRAB***

Citing media reports, Suseelan said the KSCA initially received an official communication from the Ministry denying censor exemption for all the submitted films, citing late submission as the sole reason. She argued that if an exemption is denied, even without detailed clarification from the Ministry, there are clear and lawful avenues available to contest the decision, provided applications are made well in advance.

"Instead of pursuing due process, the organisers seem to have opted for public outrage, which raises serious questions about intent. If the objective was a PR stunt, then the purpose has been served," she said.

She warned that the KSCA's "mishandling" of the issue could have long-term consequences for the festival, including heightened scrutiny, tighter controls and avoidable complications for future submissions, screenings and the participation of international filmmakers.

"The damage caused here will not be easy to undo," Suseelan said, adding that using the festival platform for publicity at the expense of audiences is irresponsible and undermines everything IFFK claims to stand for.

The controversy erupted after the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting denied censor exemption to 19 films selected for screening at the festival. Four films were later cleared, while the fate of the remaining titles triggered protests and strong reactions from filmmakers and political leaders in Kerala.

Among the films that later received exemption were 'Once upon a time in Gaza', 'Eagles of the Republic', 'Inside the Wolf' and 'Tunnels: Sun in the Dark'.

Kerala Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan on Tuesday directed the KSCA to ensure that all films scheduled for the festival are screened. The directive came amid mounting criticism from the film fraternity and cultural activists.

The issue was further compounded by the absence of KSCA chairman Resul Pookutty from the festival due to prior commitments abroad. Several noted filmmakers said the situation could have been avoided.

Veteran director Kamal, a former KSCA chairman, said it was disappointing that the festival was proceeding without the presence of its head. Filmmaker Dr Biju echoed the sentiment, stating that it was the first time IFFK was being held without either a chairman or an artistic director. "The Academy should not have taken things so lightly," he said.

Kerala's Minister for Culture, Saji Cherian, took a sharply critical stance against the Centre. In an Instagram post on December 16, he said all films cancelled by the Union government at IFFK 2025 would be screened. He described the Centre's action as an unjustified and unprecedented intrusion into the state's cultural sphere.

"The denial of 'Censor Exemption' by the Union Ministry of Information and Broadcasting to 19 films selected for screening at the 30th International Film Festival of Kerala is an unnecessary intrusion into Kerala's cultural sphere," Cherian wrote. "This anti-democratic approach cannot be accepted."

He said IFFK has, for three decades, been one of India's most important film festivals, bringing global cinema to Kerala's audiences. Calling it a progressive cultural tradition, the minister said the state government would not allow any attempt to malign Kerala or curtail artistic expression. *—PTI*

SALAR ساڈا

AI to make Indian offices intelligent, human-centred

The convergence of artificial intelligence, evolving labour regulations and rising employee expectations will redefine how organisations manage pay, people and performance in the coming year, a report says.

According to ADP, a leading global technology company specialising in Human Capital Management (HCM) solutions, the Indian workplace of 2026 will be increasingly intelligent, interconnected and human-centred.

Organisations that embrace payroll modernisation, invest in compliance readiness, and prioritise employee financial well-being are better positioned to navigate the uncertainties of the future workforce.

"The year ahead brings both opportunity and complexity for India's employers. Skills are becoming the new currency, automation is reshaping how work gets done, and employees are expecting work experience that supports both productivity and personal well-being.

"In such a scenario, organisations that respond with empathy, structure and agility will be able to stay ahead of the curve," said Rahul Goyal, Managing Director, ADP India and Southeast Asia.

The three factors that will redefine the future workplace are AI, compliance complexity and changing employee expectations.

According to ADP research data, nearly 35 per cent of Indian businesses identify AI adoption as the primary enabler of HR and payroll innovation over the next two to three years -- the highest across the APAC region.

- The three factors that will redefine the future workplace are AI, compliance complexity and changing employee expectations.

"As enterprises scale, automation will increasingly handle high-volume, rule-based processes, freeing HR teams to focus on judgment-led decisions and employee engagement," the report said.

Going ahead, with tighter regulatory scrutiny and evolving labour definitions, accurate time and attendance management will become a core operational priority.

"Organisations are expected to invest more in biometric systems, secure mobile attendance tools and geolocation-enabled solutions to ensure reliable records," the report said, adding that compliance remains a key pressure point.

According to the Future of Pay in India 2025 report, a large percentage of Indian organisations struggle to keep pace with regulatory changes, making this a significant area of focus in the year ahead.

In 2026, well-being initiatives will expand beyond traditional health benefits to include mental health counselling, financial planning, caregiving resources and structured programs on stress management, resilience building and maintaining personal balance.

"Hybrid work structures will also continue to evolve in line with India's realities, with many companies adopting hub-and-spoke approaches to tap talent in smaller cities," the report said.

In 2026, interactive payslips, digital pay wallets and earned wage access solutions will gain traction.

However, according to the ADP's survey, adoption of flexible pay structures in India remains limited, with only about 30 per cent of organisations currently exploring models such as performance-based compensation and on-demand pay.

As these practices evolve, variable pay is likely to make up a larger share of total earnings, with a stronger linkage to outcomes that reflect both individual performance and role-specific contributions, the report said.

Moreover, companies are likely to strengthen their focus on pay equity, shifting from periodic assessments to continuous, analytics-driven monitoring to ensure fairness and transparency.

Lastly, financial wellness programs will continue to gain ground, with companies offering tax guidance, savings tools, investment awareness sessions and retirement planning resources to help employees build long-term stability, the report said. *—PTI*

In 2026, well-being initiatives will expand beyond traditional health benefits to include mental health counselling, financial planning, caregiving resources and stress management ***PHOTO: FREEPIK***

LETTERS write to us at salarenglishdigital@gmail.com

Snow seasons shorten, sea ice thins as Arctic sees hottest year

The Arctic is transforming faster and with wider consequences than scientists anticipated two decades ago, when the first Arctic Report Card assessed the state of the planet's far north. The 20th edition shows a region warming at more than twice the global average, with changes intensifying risks for communities, ecosystems and economies far beyond the Arctic.

Snow seasons are shortening, sea ice is thinning and melting earlier, wildfire seasons are worsening, and warming oceans are reshaping marine ecosystems as non-Arctic species move north. Thawing permafrost is degrading rivers and drinking water, while stronger storms fuelled by warmer seas are threatening Arctic communities.

The latest water year, from October 2024 to September 2025, recorded the highest Arctic air temperatures in 125 years. Autumn was the warmest ever measured, while winter and summer were among the warmest on record. Scientists compiled the findings with the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, alongside international researchers and Indigenous partners, tracking changes in air and ocean temperatures, sea ice, snow, glaciers, ecosystems and community impacts.

A WETTER ARCTIC, MORE EXTREME WEATHER

Warming is intensifying the Arctic water cycle. A warmer atmosphere increases evaporation, precipitation and meltwater, driving heavier rain and snow, altering river flows and disrupting ecosystems.

The Arctic recorded its wettest year on record in 2025. Spring set a new precipitation high, while other seasons ranked among the five wettest since at least 1950. Extreme systems, particularly atmospheric rivers — narrow corridors transporting vast amounts of water vapour — played a major role.

These conditions are reshaping snow cover. Although winter snowpack was above average, rapid spring melting left snow cover far below normal by June, continuing a six-decade decline. June snow cover is now about half of what it was in the 1960s.

SNOW AND ICE LOSS AMPLIFY WARMING

The loss of late-spring snow removes a bright, reflective surface that once helped cool the region. As darker land absorbs more sunlight, warming accelerates.

Sea ice mirrors this trend. Maximum ice coverage in March 2025 was the lowest in the 47-year satellite record, while September's minimum ranked as the 10th lowest. Since the 1980s, summer sea ice extent has shrunk by about 50 per cent, and the oldest, thickest ice has declined by more than 95 per cent.

The Arctic recorded its wettest year on record in 2025. Spring set a new precipitation high, while other seasons ranked among the five wettest since at least 1950 ***PHOTO: PIXABAY***

Thinner ice is more easily driven by winds and currents and less resilient to warm waters, increasing variability and risk for people who live, work and travel on the ice. The Greenland Ice Sheet continued its long-term mass loss in 2025, adding to global sea-level rise. Mountain glaciers across the Arctic are retreating rapidly, with annual ice loss tripling since the 1990s.

This retreat is creating immediate hazards. Glacial lake outburst floods are becoming more frequent. In Juneau, Alaska, floods from Mendenhall Glacier recently inundated homes and displaced residents. Glacier retreat has also increased landslide risks. In August 2025, a landslide near Alaska's South Sawyer Glacier triggered a tsunami in Tracy Arm fjord, sending waves nearly 1,600 feet up the opposite slope. Cruise ships that normally visit the fjord were absent at the time.

RECORD-WARM OCEANS RESHAPE STORMS

Arctic Ocean surface waters continued to warm, with August 2025 among the hottest on record.

In parts of the Atlantic sector, temperatures were up to 7.2°C above the 1991–2020 average, though some areas of the Chukchi and Beaufort seas were cooler than normal.

Warm waters in the Bering Sea fuelled one of the year's most destructive events: Ex-Typhoon Halong, which struck western Alaska with hurricane-force winds and severe flooding, badly damaging villages including Kipnuk and Kwigillingok.

As oceans warm, powerful Pacific cyclones are reaching higher latitudes and retaining strength longer. Of four ex-typhoons to reach Alaska's Arctic since 1970, three have occurred in the past four years.

Warmer, saltier Atlantic water is also pushing north in a process known as Atlantification.

This weakens ocean layering that once insulated sea ice from deeper heat, accelerating ice loss and altering marine ecosystems.

Changes in phytoplankton timing and a higher risk of harmful algal blooms are already emerging.

FROM BOREALISATION TO TUNDRA GREENING

As sea ice declines, boreal marine species are expanding north. In the northern Bering and Chukchi seas, Arctic species have declined by two-thirds and one-half respectively, while southern species increase.

On land, tundra greenness reached its third-highest level in 26 years in 2025, driven by longer growing seasons and warmer temperatures. However, greening is uneven, with browning events linked to wildfires and extreme weather becoming more common.

Summer 2025 marked the fourth straight year of above-median wildfire activity across northern North America. Nearly 1,600 square miles burned in Alaska and more than 5,000 square miles in Canada's Northwest Territories.

PERMAFROST THAW TURNS RIVERS ORANGE

Thawing permafrost is releasing iron and other minerals into rivers, turning more than 200 watersheds in Arctic Alaska orange. These rivers show higher acidity and toxic metal levels, threatening fish, drinking water and subsistence livelihoods. In a tributary of Alaska's Akillik River, all juvenile fish died after a sudden spike in acidity. *—PTI*

PHOTO: FREEPIK

States sue Trump over EV charging funds

DETROIT, 17 DEC

A coalition of US states has sued the Trump administration over what they call the unlawful withholding of more than USD 2 billion in funding for electric vehicle charging programmes. Filed in Washington state, the lawsuit challenges the freezing of funds approved by Congress under the Biden-era infrastructure law. Led by California and Colorado, the states accuse the administration of undermining climate goals and green jobs. The White House has rolled back EV-friendly policies as sales slow and automakers pivot towards hybrids. *—PTI*

2 cops killed amid anti-US protests in Colombia

BOGOTA, 17 DEC

Two Colombian police officers were killed in Cali when a roadside bomb struck their motorcycles, in an attack linked to the National Liberation Army (ELN), though the group has not claimed responsibility. The incident occurred during a 72-hour ELN "armed strike" protesting the US military presence in the Caribbean, which also saw attacks on police stations and military bases near the Venezuela border. Separately, the FARC-EMC attacked a police station in Buenos Aires, south of Cali, killing two officers and damaging government buildings, including a bank. President Gustavo Petro condemned the violence, accusing the ELN of abandoning revolutionary ideals and operating as drug traffickers, while Colombian authorities criticised the strikes for harming rural and urban communities. *—PTI*

California cult leaders charged with two murders

SAM BERNARDINO, 17 DEC

Members of a secretive Californian religious group, His Way Spirit Led Assemblies, have been charged with murder in two separate cases. Shelley "Kat" Martin, 62, a group leader, faces charges in the deaths of Emilio Ghanem, 40, who disappeared in 2023 and whose truck was found burned in the Mojave Desert, and four-year-old Timothy Thomas, who died in 2010 while in the temporary custody of Shelley and her husband, Darryl Martin, 58. Authorities say the Martins prevented Timothy from receiving medical treatment for appendicitis. Timothy's father, former group member Andre Thomas, is also charged. Police describe His Way as a "high-control" group, and former members' testimony helped reopen Timothy's case, while Ghanem's body remains missing. *—PTI*

Warner Bros urge shareholders to bin Paramount's bid

NEW YORK, 17 DEC

Warner Bros has urged its shareholders to reject a hostile takeover bid from Paramount Skydance, saying a rival offer from Netflix would be more beneficial for customers and the industry. The board said it had carefully reviewed Paramount's unsolicited offer of $30 per share but remained committed to the Netflix-backed deal, valued at $27.75 per share. Paramount went directly to shareholders last week after Warner Bros rejected multiple earlier proposals. While Paramount's bid includes Warner's cable and news assets, Netflix's offer excludes the cable business and will proceed only after Warner completes its planned separation. Both bids face intense regulatory scrutiny, with concerns over media consolidation, streaming dominance and editorial independence. Political factors could also influence approval. *—PTI*

US extends travel ban to Palestine, Syria

The list includes 20 nations including Nigeria and Senegal

NEW YORK/ WASHINGTON, 17 DEC

The Trump administration has expanded US travel bans and entry restrictions to 20 additional countries, along with individuals holding Palestinian Authority (PA)-issued travel documents, citing national security and public safety concerns.

US President Donald Trump on Tuesday signed a proclamation strengthening restrictions on nationals from countries with what the administration described as "demonstrated, persistent, and severe deficiencies" in screening, vetting and information-sharing. The measures, the White House said, are aimed at preventing the entry of foreign nationals about whom the US lacks sufficient information to assess security risks and enforce immigration laws.

Partial restrictions were imposed on nationals from 15 countries: Angola, Antigua and Barbuda, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominica, Gabon, The Gambia, Malawi, Mauritania, Nigeria, Senegal, Tanzania, Tonga, Zambia and Zimbabwe. Full entry restrictions were applied to Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, South Sudan and Syria.

Full restrictions were also placed on individuals travelling on PA-issued or endorsed documents. The proclamation said US-designated terrorist groups operate in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and have killed American citizens, while the ongoing conflict has compromised vetting capabilities. Given what it called the PA's weak or non-existent control over these areas, travellers cannot currently be properly vetted.

US President Donald Trump on Tuesday signed the proclamation *PHOTO: PTI*

- Full restrictions were also placed on individuals travelling on Palestinian Authority-issued or endorsed documents.

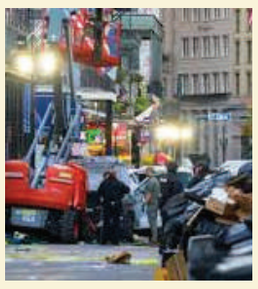
Laos and Sierra Leone, previously under partial restrictions, were moved to full restrictions. Partial restrictions on Burundi, Cuba, Togo and Venezuela remain in force.

The proclamation continues full bans on nationals from 12 previously listed "high-risk" countries, including Afghanistan, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and Yemen. Exemptions apply to lawful permanent residents, existing visa holders, certain categories such as diplomats and athletes, and individuals whose entry serves US national interests. *—PTI*

Plans for attack in New Orleans thwarted

Baton Rouge, 17 Dec

Plans for an attack in New Orleans were foiled after an ex-Marine, Micah James Legnon, 28, was arrested en route with guns, body armour and ammunition, court documents show. Legnon, linked to the far-left Turtle Island Liberation Front, allegedly invoked "recreating" the 1993 Waco siege after a major ICE crackdown. Agents found assault weapons, manuals and explosives-related material. The case is tied to a wider plot, with group members arrested in California. *—PTI*



TRUMP BLOCKS OIL TO VENEZUELA

WASHINGTON, 17 DEC

President Donald Trump on Tuesday said he is ordering a blockade of all "sanctioned oil tankers" entering or leaving Venezuela, sharply escalating pressure on President Nicolas Maduro in a move aimed at tightening the country's economic chokehold.

The announcement followed last week's seizure of an oil tanker off Venezuela's coast and a visible US military buildup in the region. In a social media post, Trump accused Venezuela of using oil revenues to fund drug trafficking and other crimes, and vowed to expand the military presence until Caracas handed over oil, land and assets he claimed were "stolen" from the US, without explaining the basis for the claim.

"Venezuela is completely surrounded by the largest Armada ever assembled in the history of South America," Trump wrote, warning of an unprecedented shock. Venezuela condemned the move as a "reckless and grave threat", accusing Trump of violating international law and free navigation. *—PTI*

HUNT ON FOR BROWN VARSITY SHOOTER

PROVIDENCE 17 DEC

Police have appealed to the public for any footage of the gunman who killed two students and wounded nine others at Brown University, releasing a new video timeline and a slightly clearer image of a possible suspect. Investigators said on Tuesday there had been no breakthrough. The suspect is described as stocky and about 5ft 8in tall, with his face masked or turned away in all footage. FBI videos show him walking near the campus for about an hour before and after the

Director Rob Reiner with his wife Michele Singer Reiner and son Nick Reiner *PHOTO: SCREENGRAB*

Nick Reiner to be charged with murder in parents' killing

LOS ANGELES, 17 DEC

Rob Reiner's son Nick Reiner will be charged with two counts of first-degree murder in the killing of his parents, Los Angeles County prosecutors said on Tuesday.

Nick Reiner, 32, will be charged in the death of the 78-year-old actor and director Rob Reiner and his wife Michele Singer Reiner, District Attorney Nathan Hochman announced at a news conference with LA Police Chief Jim McDonnell. Prosecutors plan to file the charges, two counts of first degree murder special circumstances of multiple murders, later on Tuesday. They will also include a special allegation that he used a dangerous weapon, a knife.

The announcement of the charges came two days after the couple was found dead from apparent stab wounds in their home in the upscale Brentwood neighbourhood of Los Angeles. Nick Reiner was arrested on suspicion of the killing and jailed hours later.

Nick Reiner had been expected to make an initial court appearance earlier on Tuesday, but his attorney Alan Jackson said he was not brought from the jail to the courthouse for medical reasons and the appearance would not come before Wednesday.

- The announcement of the charges came two days after the couple was found dead from apparent stab wounds in their home in the upscale Brentwood neighbourhood of Los Angeles

Jackson did not comment further on the case, and Nick Reiner has not yet entered a plea.

Rob Reiner was the Emmy-winning star of the sitcom 'All in the Family' who went on to direct films including 'When Harry Met Sally' and 'The Princess Bride'. He was an outspoken liberal activist for decades. Michele Singer Reiner was a photographer, movie producer and advocate for LGBTQ+ rights. They had been married for 36 years.

Representatives for the Reiner family did not respond to requests for comment. *—PTI*

Aus shooting suspects charged with 15 counts of murder

SYDNEY, 17 DEC

A 24-year-old man accused of carrying out Australia's deadliest antisemitic attack has been charged with 59 offences, including 15 counts of murder and committing a terrorist act, as funerals began for victims of Sunday's Bondi Beach massacre.

Police said Naveed Akram was charged after waking from a coma in hospital, where he has been since officers shot him during the attack. His 50-year-old father, Sajid Akram, who allegedly acted with him, was killed at the scene. Fifteen people, all Jewish, were killed when the pair opened fire at a Hanukkah celebration. More than 20 others remain in hospital. Investigators said improvised explosive devices were found in the attackers' car.

Authorities believe the shooting was a terrorist attack inspired by the Islamic State group. They are examining what was previously known about the suspects, including a November trip to the Philippines. Manila said there was no evidence the country was used for terrorist training. Indian police said the elder Akram migrated from Hyderabad to Australia in 1998.

A grieving family attends a funeral at a synagogue in Bondi, Sydney, on Wednesday as services begin for the victims of the massacre *PHOTO: PTI*

As Sydney's Jewish community buried its dead, including assistant rabbi Eli Schlanger, 41, and victims aged from 10 to 87, Prime Minister Anthony Albanese pledged action on antisemitism and further tightening of Australia's already strict gun laws, after it emerged the elder suspect legally owned multiple weapons.

Amid the grief, Australians rallied around Ahmed al Ahmed, a Syrian-Australian shopkeeper who tackled and disarmed one gunman, despite being shot. More than AU$2.3 million has been raised for the father of two, hailed by leaders as a symbol of courage and unit *—PTI*

Israel stops Canada MPs' West Bank visit

OTTAWA, 17 DEC

Israel has barred a private Canadian delegation, including six members of Parliament, from entering the occupied West Bank, citing links to an organisation it has designated a terrorist group.

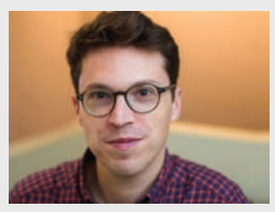
The Israeli Embassy in Canada said the delegation was denied entry because of its association with Islamic Relief Worldwide, a nongovernmental organisation Israel lists as a terror entity. The group had planned to meet displaced Palestinians in the West Bank, where Israel has recently approved 764 new homes in Jewish settlements.

Palestinians gather their belongings ahead of planned Israeli army home demolitions in a refugee camp in the West Bank

Canadian Foreign Minister Anita Anand said Ottawa has raised its "objections regarding the mistreatment of these Canadians". Ontario Liberal MP Iqra Khalid said she was shoved several times by Israeli border officials at the Allenby crossing between Jordan and the West Bank after she tried to check on a delegation member who had been pulled aside for questioning. Khalid said officials knew she was an MP because they had taken her special parliamentary passport.

The delegation, organised by The Canadian-Muslim Vote, comprised about 30 people.

British Columbia New Democrat MP Jenny Kwan said the delegation's electronic travel authorisations were revoked on the day of arrival. *—PTI*



MIT nuclear professor shot dead at home

BROOKLINE, 17 DEC

A homicide investigation has been launched into the killing of a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology who was fatally shot at his home near Boston.

Nuno FG Loureiro, a 47-year-old professor of physics, nuclear science and engineering, was shot on Monday night at his home in Brookline, Massachusetts. He died at a local hospital on Tuesday, the Norfolk District Attorney's Office said in a statement.

The prosecutor's office said no suspects had been taken into custody as of Tuesday afternoon, and that the investigation was ongoing.

Loureiro, who joined MIT in 2016, had been named last year to lead MIT's Plasma Science and Fusion Centre, where he hoped to advance clean energy technology. The centre, one of MIT's largest labs, had more than 250 people working across seven buildings when he took the helm. A 22-year-old student at Boston University who lives near Loureiro's apartment in Brookline told The Boston Globe she heard three loud noises on Monday evening and feared it was gunfire. "I had never heard anything so loud, so I assumed they were gunshots," Liv Schachner was quoted as saying. *—PTI*

BIDDERS DEMAND CONTROL

Pakistan to sell 100% stake in national flag carrier

ISLAMABAD, 17 DEC

Pakistan has decided to sell its entire 100 per cent stake in Pakistan International Airlines after bidders sought complete managerial control with no government role post-privatisation, local media reported on Wednesday.

Bidding is scheduled for 23 December and will initially be for 75 per cent shares of the loss-making national flag-carrier, with the winning bidder given an option to acquire the remaining 25 per cent within a month after bidding at a 12 per cent premium.

The extra 12 per cent price is charged as the buyer is allowed to delay payment for one year instead of instant payment.

The government will receive only 7.5 per cent of the bid amount in cash, while 92.5 per cent will be reinvested directly into PIA to support revival, officials told The Express Tribune newspaper.

The federal government is selling 100 per cent shares because all four bidders wanted the government to have no role in PIA after the deal, privatisation commission officials said.

Major business groups like Lucky Cement Consortium, Arif Habib Consortium, Fauji Foundation-owned Fauji Fertiliser and Air Blue are bidding for PIA, reports added.

Earlier, Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif had indicated plans to sell only a 60 per cent stake, but the move failed to attract serious buyers in 2024. *—PTI*

PAK GOVT WORKERS TO GET INDIGENOUS MESSAGING APP 'BEEP'

ISLAMABAD, 17 DEC

Pakistan is set to roll out a locally developed secure messaging app, "Beep," for government employees in the coming months, local media reported on Wednesday.

The National Assembly Standing Committee on Information Technology and Telecom was informed on Tuesday that the messaging app inspired by the Chinese social media platform WeChat is almost ready for launch and is expected to meet the project deadline of 30 June 2026, the Dawn newspaper reported.

National Information Technology Board (NITB) Chief Executive Faisal Iqbal Ratyal said that "Beep" had been locally developed and certified by relevant government agencies for official use, such as the National Computer Emergency Response Team (NCERT), which has formally cleared the application for official use. *—PTI*

Global trade getting weaponised through tariffs: FM

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman PHOTO: PTI

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman on Wednesday said that global trade is "getting weaponised" through tariffs and other measures, and India will have to negotiate carefully. She said that the strength of our economy will give the country added advantage.

"Trade is getting weaponised through tariff, through many other measures and India will have to negotiate its way carefully in this, and not just take care of tariff. But I think overall our economy's strength is what is going to give us advantage," Sitharaman said at Times Network's India Economic Conclave 2025. She said that globally it is now "very clear" that trade is not free and fair.

"India can be lectured saying you (India) are very inward-looking, you are a tariff king and so on. But tariff has been weaponised," she said.

But the weaponisation of trade today is not criticised,

- Sitharaman said at Times Network's India Economic Conclave 2025. She said that globally it is now "very clear" that trade is not free and fair.

she said, adding that some nations state that tariffs are not good and no one should take these measures but "suddenly we have new people coming up saying we'll come up with tariff barriers and there's no questioning. So that seems to be the new normal."

She said from next financial year debt levels will be the core focus area, along with fiscal deficit, and told states to lower their debt so that the country can achieve its goal of becoming a developed nation by 2047.

India's debt-to-GDP shot up to 61.4 per cent post Covid, but Central policies helped bring it down to 57.1 per cent by 2023-24. The government hopes it to reduce to 56.1 per cent this year. —*PTI*

Centre extends SBI MD's tenure by two years

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

The government has extended the tenure of State Bank of India Managing Director Ashwini Kumar Tewari for another two years. The Centre re-appointed Ashwini Kumar Tewari as Managing Director of the State Bank of India (SBI) with effect from the date of his assumption of charge of the post, beyond his currently notified term, which is ending on 27 January 2026, till the date of his superannuation, that is, 31 December 2027, the SBI said in a regulatory filing on Wednesday. This is the second time Tewari is getting a two-year extension. The first time he got an extension was in 2024. He was appointed as MD of SBI in January 2021 for a three-year term. —*PTI*

CNG, PNG prices to fall from January

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Consumers across India will see lower prices for Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) and domestic Piped Natural Gas (PNG) from 1 January, 2026, following a tariff rationalisation by the Petroleum and Natural Gas Regulatory Board (PNGRB). The regulator has reduced the tariff structure from three zones to two, introducing a unified pan-India rate of Rs 54 for CNG and domestic PNG users. This replaces earlier higher slabs of Rs 80 and Rs 107, delivering savings of Rs 2-3 per unit, depending on state taxes. The move will benefit consumers in 312 geographical areas served by 40 city gas distribution companies. PNGRB has directed operators to pass on the benefit to consumers and will monitor compliance. —*ANI*

Rupee recovers 55P from all-time low against USD

On Tuesday, rupee hit a new all-time low of 91.14 against USD

MUMBAI, 17 DEC

The rupee recovered 55 paise from its all-time low level to close at 90.38 (provisional) against the US dollar after a volatile trade on Wednesday, amid suspected aggressive central bank intervention.

Analysts said the rupee's recent fall against the US dollar was primarily driven by external factors, not domestic economic weakness, and the high volatility in the forex market is expected to persist amid shifting economic and geopolitical cues.

The lack of progress in the US–India trade negotiations and extended selling by foreign portfolio investors have weighed on the sentiment, while Brent crude oil prices hovering near USD 60 per barrel supported the domestic unit at lower levels.

At the interbank foreign exchange, the rupee opened at 91.05 against the US dollar, then recovered some lost ground to touch an intra-day high of 89.96, registering a 97 paise gain from its previous close. At the end of trade on Wednesday, the rupee was quoted at 90.38 (provisional), up 55 paise over its last close.

On Tuesday, the rupee tanked below 91 per dollar, hitting a low of 91.14. It finally settled at an all-time low of 90.93 against the American currency.

"The Indian rupee appreciated after a five-day losing streak, bolstered by suspected aggressive intervention from the central bank," Dilip Parmar, Research Analyst, HDFC Securities, said.

Parmar further added that high volatility is expected to persist in the forex market amid shifting economic and geopolitical headlines. "Technically, USD/INR has immediate resistance at 90.60 and support at 89.70," he said.

Meanwhile, the dollar index, which gauges the greenback's strength against a basket of six currencies, was trading 0.42 per cent higher at 98.56.

Brent crude, the global oil benchmark, was trading 2.09 per cent higher at USD 60.16 per barrel in futures trade. —*PTI*

JUMPS BY RS 7,300

Silver crosses record of '2L/kg

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

- In the local bullion market, gold prices climbed by Rs 600 to Rs 1,36,500 per 10g, compared to the previous close of Rs 1,35,900 per 10g, as per the association.

Silver prices on Wednesday breached the record Rs 2 lakh-per-kilogram mark in the national capital for the first time, driven by strong demand in domestic and global markets, according to the All India Sarafa Association.

The white metal jumped by Rs 7,300 to hit an all-time high of Rs 2,05,800 per kilogram (kg) on Wednesday, against the previous closing level of Rs 1,98,500 per kg.

So far in this year, silver prices have added Rs 1,15,300, or 127.40 per cent, since the level of Rs 90,500 per kilogram recorded on 1 January, 2025.

In the local bullion market, gold prices climbed by Rs 600 to Rs 1,36,500 per 10g (inclusive of all taxes), compared to the previous close of Rs 1,35,900 per 10g, as per the association.

In the international markets, spot gold went up by USD 18.59, or 0.43 per cent, to USD 4,321.06 per ounce.

"Spot gold is trading with a gain of around 0.4 per cent at USD 4,320 per ounce as traders await the US Consumer Price Index (CPI) data to be released on Thursday," Praveen Singh, Research Analyst, Mirae Asset ShareKhan, said.

In addition, spot silver crossed the USD 66-per-ounce mark for the first time in the overseas trade. The white metal climbed by USD 2.77, or 4.35 per cent, to hit a fresh record of USD 66.52 per ounce.

During the year, silver prices have zoomed by USD 36.96, or 125.05 per cent, from USD 29.55 per ounce on 2 January, 2025. —*PTI*

Amazon launches biometric UPI payments

MUMBAI, 17 DEC

Amazon Pay on Wednesday launched a unified payments interface (UPI) biometric authentication feature, which enables users to make payments using fingerprints or face scans. According to the firm, the new feature allows customers to use biometrics for transactions of up to Rs 5,000 across Amazon Pay UPI services. This includes transferring money to individuals, scanning and paying at stores, merchant payment and balance checks, sources said. This means that there will be no need to remember a PIN code to execute a transaction, the company said in a statement, claiming this to be an industry first. The authentication for biometrics is linked to the user's device, which, according to the company, provides an additional layer of security as biometric data is not shareable, it said. —*PTI*

Tesla launches first charging station in Gurugram

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Electric vehicle major Tesla on Wednesday said it has launched its first charging station in Gurugram at DLF Horizon Center. This significant step reinforces Tesla's commitment to building a robust charging infrastructure in India, empowering customers with seamless and sustainable mobility solutions, the company said in a statement. The company is looking to create charging infrastructure around the lifestyle of customers, he added. The Supercharging site, located in the Surface Parking Area at Horizon Center is equipped with four V4 Superchargers with peak charging speed of 250 kW; and three destination chargers providing charging speed of 11 kW, ensuring flexibility for every Tesla owner and catering to diverse customer needs, it added. —*PTI*

TATA CHEMICALS RAISES RS 1,500 CR THROUGH NCDS

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Tata Chemicals Ltd on Wednesday said it has raised Rs 1,500 crore through the allotment of non-convertible debentures (NCDs) on a private placement basis.

The company has allotted 1,50,000 listed, unsecured, rated, redeemable, taxable, non-cumulative non-convertible debentures, having a face value of Rs 1 lakh each, for cash, it said in a regulatory filing.

The NCDs have a tenure of two years and 364 days, and carry a fixed rate coupon of 7.06 per cent, Tata Chemicals said. The debentures have been issued to identified investors based on multiple yield allotment methods, it added. The NCDs will be listed on the Debt Segment of National Stock Exchange of India Limited (NSE).

The allotment was approved by the internal committee constituted by the board of directors of the company, Tata Chemicals said.

NCDs are debt instruments issued by companies to raise long-term funds. They are popular among investors seeking stable, fixed returns without equity exposure. —*PTI*

IndiGo founders join top self-made entrepreneurs

MUMBAI, 17 DEC

IndiGo promoters Rahul Bhatia and Rakesh Gangwal have entered the top 10 of India's self-made entrepreneurs after building the airline into a Rs 2.2 lakh crore business in 2025, according to the IDFC First Private and Hurun India Top 200 Self-Made Entrepreneurs of the Millennia 2025 list.

The duo ranked third, with Hurun citing IndiGo's 65 per cent share of India's domestic aviation market, rapid international expansion and sustainability initiatives such as biofuel trials and fuel-efficient aircraft.

Eternal founder Deepinder Goyal topped the list for the first time, with his business valued at Rs 3.2 lakh crore, up 27 per cent year-on-year.

He overtook Avenue Super arts founder Radhakishan Damani, whose valuation fell 13 per cent to Rs 3 lakh crore.

Swiggy co-founders Sriharsha Majety and Nandan Reddy ranked fifth following a 5 per cent rise in valuation to Rs 1.06 lakh crore.

Paytm founder Vijay Shekhar Sharma climbed to eighth place after a 67 per cent jump in valuation to Rs 72,900 crore.

The combined value of companies on the list rose 15 per cent to Rs 42 lakh crore in 2025, with 128 billion-dollar businesses founded by self-made entrepreneurs. —*PTI*

2,694 STOCKS DECLINE

Markets fall for 3rd straight day amid foreign fund outflows

MUMBAI, 17 DEC

Stock markets declined for the third consecutive day on Wednesday, with benchmark Sensex closing lower by 120 points at a week's low due to relentless foreign fund outflows.

The 30-share BSE Sensex edged lower by 120.21 points or 0.14 per cent to settle at 84,559.65. During the day, it dropped 263.88 points or 0.31 per cent to 84,415.98.

The 50-share NSE Nifty declined by 41.55 points or 0.16 per cent to a week's low of 25,818.55.

Among Sensex firms, Trent fell the most by 1.61 per cent.

HDFC Bank dropped by nearly 1 per cent, emerging as a major drag on the index. ICICI Bank, Adani Ports, Bajaj Finserv, Bharat Electronics, Titan and Asian Paints were also among the laggards.

However, State Bank of India rose the most by 1.51 per cent, helping Sensex restrict losses. Infosys, Axis Bank and Maruti were among the gainers.

Analysts said a rebound in the rupee from record low levels offers temporary relief, as global uncertainty and sustained foreign selling keep upside potential limited.

Foreign Institutional Investors (FIIs) offloaded equities worth Rs 2,381.92 crore on Tuesday, while Domestic Institutional Investors (DIIs) bought stocks worth Rs 1,077.48 crore, according to exchange data.

The BSE smallcap gauge declined 0.85 per cent and midcap index dipped by 0.53 per cent.

Among sectoral indices, capital goods declined by 0.96 per cent, realty (0.81 per cent), consumer durables, industrials (0.76 per cent), services (0.64 per cent).

BSE Energy, IT, metal, oil & gas, teck and BSE Focused IT were the gainers.

A total of 2,694 stocks declined while 1,475 advanced and 159 remained unchanged on the BSE. —*PTI*

Anil Agarwal plans to split Vedanta into 5 firms

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Oil-to-metals conglomerate Vedanta Ltd's proposed demerger is targeted for completion by March 2026 and will result in five independently listed, pure-play companies, each capable of growing to the scale of the current parent, its Chairman **Anil Agarwal** said on Wednesday.

The National Company Law Tribunal (NCLT) on Tuesday approved the plan to split Vedanta into five different listed entities.

After the demerger, the base metals business will be housed in Vedanta Ltd, while Vedanta Aluminium, Talwandi Sabo Power, Vedanta Steel and Iron and Malco Energy will be the other four entities.

In an interview with PTI, Agarwal said the demerger was chosen over asset sales or alternative restructuring to unlock the full growth potential of each business, including zinc, aluminium, oil and gas, power, and iron ore and steel amid strong and rising demand, particularly in India.

"Vedanta is like a big Banyan tree. There is tremendous potential in each business, and each one of them has the potential to become a Banyan tree by itself," he said.

"I have a vision that each company be as big as Vedanta in terms of revenue. Effectively, we are creating five more Vedantas, which will make shareholders the happiest." —*PTI*

OVER 24M DOWNLOADS

'Growing AI use makes India largest LLM mkt'

MUMBAI, 17 DEC

- This makes India the "ideal test bed" for agentic AI apps built on top of LLMs that can reason, plan and execute tasks independently, the report by Bofa Securities said.

The growing use of platforms such as ChatGPT, Gemini and Perplexity has made India the world's largest market for large language model (LLM) adoption, a foreign brokerage said on Wednesday.

This makes India the "ideal test bed" for agentic AI apps built on top of LLMs that can reason, plan and execute tasks independently, the report by Bofa Securities said.

However, on the flip side, this can lead to some impact on the domestic startup ecosystem, Bofa Securities said.

The number of ChatGPT downloads peaked at over 24 million in July before falling a bit and plateauing at 24 million once OpenAI zero-cost subscriptions, while Airtel's bundled pack helped Perplexity peak at over 20 million downloads in October, the report said.

ChatGPT is the number one platform in India among the LLMs with around 145 million monthly active users and Gemini comes second at 105 million, it said.

On a daily basis, 65 million Indians use the OpenAI-led ChatGPT, while Gemini comes second at 15 million daily average users.

Over 16 per cent of ChatGPT's global base is from India, making the country as the largest market for the platform, the Bofa Securities report said.

Interestingly, India is also the largest for peers, including Google Gemini which gets 30 per cent of its monthly average users from here and Perplexity which derives 38 per cent of monthly average users, it said. —*PTI*

India Inc to see 9% salary growth in 2026: Report

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Average employee salaries in India are set to increase by 9 per cent in 2026, with a renewed focus on short-term incentives and skills-based systems, a report said on Wednesday.

According to Mercer's Total Remuneration Survey 2026, organisations in India are shifting toward broader, more holistic value propositions and the top factors influencing salary increases include individual performance, inflation and the organisation's competitiveness in the job market, among others.

The survey, which covered remuneration trends across more than 8,000 roles and in more than 1,500 companies, revealed that organisations are continuing to refine their rewards packages, with a focus on short-term incentives, moving toward more transparent, skills acquisition and deployment-based systems.

Adding to this, the implementation of newly-approved labour codes will tighten the social security net and preventive health care, the report by the global consulting firm noted. —*PTI*

PHOTO: PTI

Shubman Gill out of T20I series with toe injury

LUCKNOW, 17 DEC

Out-of-form India vice-captain Shubman Gill has been ruled out of the last two T20I games against South Africa with a toe injury, sources close to the team told PTI.It is learnt that Gill has sustained the injury during a training session and all precautionary measures are being taken to ensure his speedy recovery-"Shubman had an extended batting session at the nets on the eve of the fourth T20 International. Towards the end of the session, he was hit on the toe while batting in the nets. 4th T20I match abandoned due to fog. *—PTI*

PHOTO: X/@TERENCE

Boxing great Crawford announces retirement

NEW YORK, 17 DEC

Undefeated world super middleweight champion Terence Crawford announced his retirement from boxing on Tuesday, hanging up his gloves three months after a career-defining victory over Saul "Canelo" Alvarez.The 38-year-old from Nebraska, who dominated Mexican legend Alvarez in Las Vegas in September to claim the undisputed super middleweight crown, announced his decision in a video posted on social media."I'm stepping away from competition, not because I'm done fighting, but because I've won a different type of battle," Crawford said in his retirement message.*—PTI*

Dembele and Aitana named best players at FIFA awards

DOHA, 17 DEC

Ousmane Dembele and Aitana Bonmati were named the best players of 2025 at the FIFA awards on Tuesday, adding to their prize collection after also winning the men's and women's Ballon d'Or this year. Dembele starred for Paris Saint-Germain in its first Champions League title win, and Bonmati was a standout for Spain and Barcelona. The FIFA awards are voted on by national team captains, coaches, media, and fans around the world. The top four prizes had the same role of honor as the Ballon d'Or awards presented in September in Paris.FIFA staged its annual Best Awards at a private dinner in Doha on the sidelines of PSG playing Flamengo the newly crowned champion of South America in the Intercontinental Cup game on Wednesday.*—PTI*

PHOTO: X/@CRICAUS

Joe set to miss T20 World Cup, Madsen named team captain

ROME, 17 DEC

Former Australia batter Joe Burns, who led Italy to its first-ever T20 World Cup qualification, will be omitted from the European nation's squad for the showpiece in India due to availability issues that came in the way of a contract between him and the Italian Cricket Federation. The Federation on Wednesday named Wayne Madsen as captain to replace the 36-year-old Burns, who made his Italy debut last year after completing a mandatory cooling-off period following his final international appearance for Australia in 2020. He took over as the captain of Italy earlier this year.*—PTI*

Satwik-Chirag open BWF World Tour Finals with win

Duo will face a test when they take on Indonesia today

HANGZHOU, 17 DEC

Satwik-Chirag start with a win over Olympic silver medallists Liang Wei Keng and Wang Chang of China
PHOTO: X/@BWF

Star Indian shuttlers Satwiksairaj Rankireddy and Chirag Shetty showed nerves of steel to eke out a thrilling three-game victory over Olympic silver medallists Liang Wei Keng and Wang Chang of China in their opening men's doubles Group B match at the BWF World Tour Finals here on Wednesday.

World No. 3 Satwik and Chirag, the only Indian representatives at the season-ending showpiece, recovered from an opening-game setback and saved a match point to eventually outwit the world No. 5 Chinese pair 12-21, 22-20, 21-14 in a gripping contest.

The Asian Games champions, who reached the finals at the Hong Kong Open and China Masters earlier this year, will face another stern test when they take on Indonesia's Fajar Alfian and Muhammad Shohibul Fikri on Thursday.

Former world No. 1 pair Satwik and Chirag came into the match trailing Liang and Wang 3-7 in head-to-head encounters, and Wednesday's clash lived up to its billing as a high-quality duel between two attacking pairs. As expected, the contest began on a tight note with both pairs focused on winning the early exchanges. Satwik and Chirag attempted to use angles and impose a sharp, fast-paced game, but the Chinese were equally prepared, with early errors from both sides keeping the opening game level at 7-7.

Need to work to improve our service and receive: Satwik

Indian men's doubles star Satwiksairaj Rankireddy on Wednesday said improving service and receive remains the key focus areas for him and partner Chirag Shetty as they look to compete consistently against the world's top pairs.

The world number 3 pair opened their campaign at the season-ending BWF World Tour Finals with a gritty 12-21, 22-20, 21-14 win over Olympic silver medallists Liang Wei Keng and Wang Chang of China in their opening men's doubles Group B match."We are practising service and receiving most of the time. It's the main part of the game. If you want to beat pairs from Malaysia, Indonesia, or China, you have to handle service situations well," Satwik said after the match. *—PTI*

FOR ALL 104 MATCHES

FIFA slashes World Cup ticket price after fan backlash

LONDON, 17 DEC

FIFA has cut the price for a select number of tickets for next year's World Cup in an apparent response to global fan outrage.

FIFA introduced "Supporter Entry Tier" tickets, set at $60 each, on Wednesday, available for all 104 matches, including the final.

According to FIFA, these tickets will be allocated to "loyal" supporters of all qualified nations.

The 48 participating countries, including Korea, will each get 8 percent of all available tickets for every match they play, and 10 percent of that allotment will account for the new tier likely to be 400 to 750 tickets per team.

The 2026 World Cup will be held in 16 host cities across the United States, Canada, and Mexico. FIFA said the national governing bodies of the participating countries will manage their own selection and distribution process.

Paris Saint-Germain (PSG), the UEFA Champions League winner, will face Brazilian champion Flamengo in the 2025 FIFA Intercontinental Cup final on Wednesday at the Ahmad Bin Ali Stadium in Al-Rayyan, Qatar.

Indians among leading ticket-buyers

One can expect the stadium to be filled to the rafters, with Indians reportedly one of the most eager groups to catch a glimpse of continental. Indian nationals are among the top three FIFA Intercontinental Cup ticket-buyers of this edition.

They were also the top non-Arab ticket-buying group for the recently-concluded FIFA Under-17 World Cup in Qatar, where Portugal beat Austria 1-0 in the final to lift its maiden world title. *—PTI*

3RD ASHES TEST

Carey's 100 and Khawaja's 82 help Australia reach 326-8 on Day 1

ADELAIDE, 17 DEC

Alex Carey posted a hometown hundred and Usman Khawaja scored 82 after a dramatic, last-minute recall to help Australia reach 326 for eight at stumps on a hot opening day of the third Ashes test. Paceman Joffra Archer (3-29) took three big wickets, including two in three balls immediately after lunch, and spinner Will Jacks (2-105) dismissed Australia's two leading scorers to give England a slight edge on Wednesday in conditions that were ideal for batting. Carey shared partnerships of 91 with Khawaja, who replaced Steve Smith at late notice, 59 with Josh Inglis, 26 with Pat Cummins, and 50 with Mitchell Starc to keep Australia's innings moving at around four runs an over. He was out just before stumps for 106, mistiming a slower ball from Jacks.

Mitchell Starc, voted player of the match in the first and second tests, continued his impressive form against England and was unbeaten on 33 at stumps. Smith led Australia to eight-wicket wins in Perth and Brisbane in the absence of Cummins. He hit the winning runs in Brisbane as Australia took a 2-0 lead in the five-match series, leaving England needing a victory in Adelaide to have any chance of reclaiming the Ashes. But Smith didn't recover in time from dizziness and nausea to start the third testAustralia 326 for 8 (Carey 106, Khawaja 82, Archer 3-29) vs England *—PTI*

Anantjeet, Darshna clinch mixed team skeet gold

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Asian Champion shooters Anantjeet Singh Naruka and Darshna Rathore produced a consistent performance to win the Senior Skeet Mixed Team gold medal at the 68th National Shooting Championship Competitions (Shotgun) here on Wednesday.

The Rajasthan duo defeated the Uttar Pradesh pair of Mairaj Ahmad Khan and Areeba Khan 45-43 in a closely contested gold medal match to seal the title, at the Dr Karni Singh Shooting Range here.

Anantjeet hit 21 targets, and Darshna contributed 24 to hold off Mairaj (21) and Areeba (22) in the gold medal match.

Earlier in the day, Rajasthan topped the qualification standings with 143 hits as Anantjeet shot 73 and Darshna added 70, securing a direct berth in the gold medal match.

Haryana's team of Raiza Dhillon (72) with 21 hits and Ishaan Singh Libra (70) with 20 hits subsequently went on to secure the bronze medal, defeating Madhya Pradesh 41–39 in the third-place match.

The Madhya Pradesh duo of Rituraj Bundela (20) and Mansi Raghuwanshi (19) finished fourth. *—PTI*

CHELSEA REACHES ENGLISH LEAGUE CUP SEMIFINALS

LONDON, 17 DEC

Chelsea's substitutes made the difference Tuesday as wingers Alejandro Garnacho and Pedro Neto scored second-half goals to secure a 3-1 win at third-tier Cardiff City and a place in the English League Cup semifinals.

Chelsea manager Enzo Maresca started with a largely second-string lineup for the first quarterfinal, but needed some of his first-team stars to avoid an upset in south Wales.

Garnacho was one of two attackers brought on for the start of the second half and opened the scoring in the 57th minute, delivering a low finish into the corner following a defensive mistake.

Cardiff equalised in the 75th through David Turnbull, but Neto restored the lead seven minutes later with a low, deflected shot into the corner, and Garnacho grabbed his second goal of the match in stoppage time. "Sometimes you have to start games, and sometimes you have to help from the bench," said Garnacho, who joined from Manchester United in August. "We don't focus on this; we just try to help the team." Maresca said there was a "big difference" after he made his substitutions. "Second half, much better on the ball," the Italian said. Chelsea reached the semifinals for the third time in five years as the team seeks a third cup triumph since Maresca arrived in the summer of 2024. It won the Europa Conference League and the Club World Cup last season.

That came with Chelsea on a four-match winless run in all competitions, but a 2-0 victory over Everton in the Premier League has been followed by progress through to the cup semifinals. *—PTI*

SL women's team departs from Colombo for T20I

COLOMBO, 17 DEC

The Sri Lanka women's cricket team left for India on Wednesday to compete in a five-match T20I series against the ODI world champions, starting from 21 December.

In their first assignment since clinching their maiden global title, India will take on Sri Lanka at two venues. The first two matches of the series will be played in Visakhapatnam on 21 and 23 December, while the remaining games will be held in Thiruvananthapuram on 26, 28, and 30 December.

The team, led by Chamari Athapaththu, is a mix of seniors and youth as Sri Lanka has axed some senior players who also had been regulars for a long time, including their disappointing World Cup campaign.

Vice-captain Anushka, Udeshika, Sugandika, and Achini Kulasuriya have been dropped.

Sri Lanka appoints R Sridhar as fielding coach

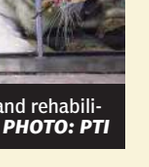
Sri Lanka Cricket on Wednesday appointed former India fielding coach R Sridhar in a similar role with their national side until the end of the T20 World Cup, to be held in February-March next year.

Sridhar, who was India's fielding coach from 2014 to 2021, also held a 10-day specialised fielding camp at Sri Lanka's National High Performance Centre earlier this year. "Sri Lanka Cricket (SLC) wishes to announce the appointment of R. Sridhar as the Fielding Coach of the Sri Lanka National Team. *—PTI*

Punjab kabaddi player's murder suspect shot dead

MOHALI, 17 DEC

A suspect in the killing of a 30-year-old kabaddi player-cum-promoter in Mohali was shot dead by police in an encounter on Wednesday.



Harpinder alias Middu, a resident of Naushehra Pannuan in Punjab's Tarn Taran district, was injured in an exchange of fire during a chase and later succumbed to injuries in the hospital, police said. Two police personnel were also injured and were given medical treatment, they said. Preliminary investigation revealed that the suspect was involved in multiple heinous crimes and has a serious criminal background, the police said. Kanwar Digvijay Singh, alias Rana Balachauria, was shot after he arrived with his team to take part in a private tournament in Mohali on Monday. *—PTI*

Anand back after six years for mentor vs Gukesh

KOLKATA, 17 DEC

It will be a compelling showdown between a mentor and his protege when five-time world champion Viswanathan Anand returns to competitive action after six years to face reigning world champion D Gukesh, among his other former wards, at the seventh Tata Steel Chess here from 7 to 11 January. Anand, who last played the tournament in 2019, will be making his comeback against a new generation of Indian stars, headlined by Gukesh, whom he has closely mentored in recent years at his WestBridge Anand Chess Academy.

It will be the first time the two world champions meet in an individual tournament on Indian soil.

The Tata Steel Chess India will be held at the Dhono Dhanyo Auditorium, featuring both Open and Women's sections in rapid and blitz formats, with equal prize money for both categories.

The Open field will also include FIDE World Cup runner-up Wei Yi, former US champion Wesley So, Hans Niemann, Volodar Murzin, and a strong Indian contingent comprising R Praggnanandhaa and Arjun Erigaisi, supported by WACA. The other Indians in the field include Vidit, Aravindh Chithambaram. *—PTI*

INDIA TOUR ENDS

Football has a bright future in India: Messi

NEW DELHI, 17 DEC

Lionel Messi during a visit to Vantara, a wildlife rescue and rehabilitation centre, in Jamnagar, Gujarat, on Wednesday PHOTO: PTI

Lionel Messi hoped that football has a "bright future" in India and expressed gratitude for the "generous hospitality" that he got here during a whirlwind three-day tour, which had thousands of fans jostling to catch a glimpse of the Argentine genius in four different cities.

Messi, after extending his stay by a day to visit the Anant Ambani-founded Vantara wildlife rescue, rehabilitation and conservation centre in Jamnagar, left for his base in Miami on Wednesday.

Taking to Instagram, the 38-year-old posted a one-minute highlights clip of the tour, featuring his interactions with Indian cricket icon Sachin Tendulkar, Bollywood actor Kareena Kapoor Khan and several young footballers.

"What amazing visits to Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, and Kolkata. Thank you for the warm reception, generous hospitality, and all the feelings of love with which you surrounded me throughout my tour.

"I hope that football has a bright future in India," he wrote underneath the video.

His good wishes come at a time when Indian football finds itself at its lowest ebb.

The domestic season has been brought to a halt for the want of a commercial partner, and the national team's fortunes have been in a free-fall following a string of poor results. An ongoing court case over administrative issues has further deepened policy paralysis. *—PTI*

Missing Olympic medal in 2000 biggest regret: Riaz

CHENNAI, 17 DEC

It's been well over two decades, but missing an Olympic medal after coming reasonably close to it rankles Mohammed Riaz to this day, even though some of his regret has eased after seeing the national team claim podium finishes in the mega-event's last two editions.

The 53-year-old former midfielder from Tamil Nadu was a part of the Indian team that ended a 32-year wait by clinching gold at the 1998 Asian Games. But the team could not replicate the performance at the 2000 Sydney Olympics, bowing out after the quarterfinal stage. "Playing Olympic is the biggest thing, and coming close to the medal and not winning it is the biggest regret. I will regret it for the rest of my life, but I am happy that India won bronze medals (in 2021 Tokyo and 2024 Paris Olympics), ending that long wait," Riaz told 'PTI Bhasha' in an interview. Hockey experts believe that the class of 2000 was the most balanced team and the strongest contender for a podium finish after the eighth and last Olympic gold in Moscow in 1980. *—PTI*